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MARINERS

BY

CLEMENCE DANE

Winifred Ashton

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NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
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PEOPLE IN THE PLAY

GEORGE SHEPPERLEY.

LADY SARA SHEPPERLEY.

JOAN SHEPPERLEY.

MISS ANN SHEPPERLEY

A MAID.

SIR JAMES FOWLER.

DR. LUDLOW BELL.

GERRY DESPARD.

MRS. BEWLEY.

VIOLET BEWLEY.

MISS PYM.

LADIES OF THE CHURCH CHOIR.

FLO SANDERS.

REV. BENJAMIN COBB.

LILY COBB.

69169

T I.—The drawing-room at the Shepperleys'. Evening.

T II.—The living-room at the Rectory. The next morning.

T III.—Scene I.—A few days later. The living-room at the Rectory. Late evening.

Scene II.—The drawing-room at the Shepperleys'. The next morning.

E Time is present day. It is winter.

E Action passes in a country village within an hour of London.

ACT I.

The curtain rises on a large square room. The door leading into the dining-room was once in the centre of the back wall, but the room has been added to, and it is now on the right of large glass doors, that open on to a moderate-sized conservatory. On the new left wall are French windows. On the old right one is a substantial fireplace, and towards the back a door leading into the mainways of the house. The furniture is elaborate, comfortable and feminine: for it is as a withdrawing room that the apartment, on its lucky days, serves LADY SARA SHEPPERLEY; *while* JOAN SHEPPERLEY *and her friends look upon it as a convenient barn to dance in. This is not one of its lucky days; for* LADY SARA *has rashly lent the room to the church* LADIES' CHOIR *for its weekly practices: and this evening, at* 7.45, *drowning the tinkle of dinner in the next room, the choir is hard at it. Table and chairs have been pushed against the wall and heaped with mackintoshes and furs, for it is bitter December weather; and* THE CHOIR *itself is bunched compactly in front of the open doors of the lighted conservatory. Tall chrysanthemums in pots that have strayed into the room itself from this harbour are suffering badly from over-crowding: one indeed goes over with a crash as the curtain rises. But* THE CHOIR *is too busy to worry about a little thing like that. All eyes are fixed on* THE RECTOR, BENJAMIN COBB, *who, with fiddle under his chin and his arm working up and down like a marionette, is glaring them into time.* THE RECTOR *is a small, shabby, middle-aged clergyman. He is, in what one may call his public moments, nervous, stilted and fidgety in speech and manner. When he is talking to somebody he likes or, better still, to someone*

who likes him, these mannerisms lessen, and it is easy to find him lovable. He looks ill and coughs occasionally; but he is quite brisk and cheerful. MISS ANN SHEPPERLEY, *a middle-aged lady, whom you suspect of caring for music, is resigned at the piano. She, like her pretty niece,* JOAN, *wears a quiet dinner frock.*

THE CHOIR [*enthusiastically*]

"Ye gentlemen of England,
'Oo live at 'ome at ease,
'Ow little do ye *think* upon
The daingers of the seas.
Give ear un*to* the mariners——"

THE RECTOR [*anguished, breaking off*] I didn't—er—quite—eh, Miss Shepperley?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. The note is A sharp, Miss Pym. "Give *ear* unto——" [*She runs over the notes with one hand.*]

THE RECTOR [*supported*] F sharp, that's it. F sharp, Miss Pym. [MISS PYM *darkens*] Will you try it, ladies?

THE CHOIR [*tentatively*]

"Give *ear* unto the mariners
An' they will plainly sho-ow——"

THE RECTOR. It's thick, that's what it is, Miss Shepperley. Thick! Muddled! I don't get the sense of the words.

MRS. BEWLEY [*a stout woman with a stout young daughter*] I always 'ave said, Mr. Cobb, that you'ld do better to solo it. 'Aven't I, Miss Shepperley?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Several times, Mrs. Bewley.

MRS. BEWLEY. Vi'let 'ere is perfectly willing——

MISS PYM [*a thin, middle-aged woman, smartly dressed*] There's too much of this solo business in my opinion. What I say is, if you're a Melba, be a Melba, and if you're a choir, be a choir; but don't mix! That's my opinion.

MRS. BEWLEY [*darkly*] Duets are more in your line, dear, aren't they?

MISS PYM. I 'ave sung duets in my time, Mrs. Bewley. What of it?

MRS. BEWLEY. In *your* time! That was the difficulty always, wasn't it, dear? Time!

THE RECTOR. Ladies, ladies! [*A pause*] Well, what about that last verse as a solo? We might try, eh, Miss Shepperley?

MRS. BEWLEY. Vi'let 'ere——

THE RECTOR. I thought we'ld ask Miss Joan——

MRS. BEWLEY. Vi'let——

THE RECTOR. Take the first four—no, the first five lines, eh, Miss Shepperley? And the choir can come in on "They shall plainly show," eh?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I should sing it straight through as a solo, Mr. Cobb, and repeat the last two lines as chorus. Try it, Joan!

JOAN [*her young, untrained voice is pleasant enough*]

"Ye gentlemen of England
Who live at home at ease,
How little do ye think upon
The dangers of the seas.
Give ear unto the mariners,
And they shall plainly show
All the cares and the fears
When the stormy winds do blow."

THE CHOIR [*rapturously*]

"*All* the cares, *and* the fears,
When the stormy *winds* do blow."

[*They pause for applause.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*diffidently*] I think—the emphasis should be on "cares," Mr. Cobb.

JOAN. And "fears."

MISS PYM [*muttering*] O' course, if Miss Shepperley thinks——

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*calmly*] All the *cares* and the *fears*——

THE RECTOR. Quite so. [*Queerly*]

"All the cares and the fears,
When the stormy winds do blow."

More dramatic, eh ?

MISS PYM. I don't 'old with play-acting.

MRS. BEWLEY. I don't see any harm in play-acting, Miss Pym, if you've the—the——

VIOLET. The legs, Mother.

MRS. BEWLEY. Now Vi'let, stop it !

MISS PYM [*ignoring them*] What I mean is, we 'aven't come 'ere to be a drama, Mr. Cobb, we've come 'ere to be a choir.

THE RECTOR [*nervously*] Oh, quite, Miss Pym, quite ! Well, shall we try it again, Joan ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY *strikes the opening chord.*

MISS PYM. I'ld like to be quite clear first 'ow I'm to sing the repeat, Mr. Cobb. I sung in this choir before you come to this parish, Mr. Cobb, and that's twenty-five years ago, and nobody has thrown it up against me yet that I've ever missed a practice—or an F sharp. But if Miss Shepperley is going to ask me to go in for play-acting——

THE RECTOR. Quite ! Quite ! I see your point, Miss Pym. But when I used the word dramatic, Miss Pym, when I say dramatic—why—drama, Miss Pym, what's drama ? That's not play-acting, that's life, Miss Pym. Yes, yes, whether you hold with it or not, life's dramatic. Eh, Miss Shepperley ?

MISS PYM. I don't hold with——

THE RECTOR [*in his stride*]

"Ye gentlemen of England
That live at home at ease——"

You and me, Miss Pym, you and me and the rest of the choir, living

at home at ease—violin, chrysanthemums, mackintoshes and all that. How little do we think upon the *dangers* of the seas! It's drama—contrast—conflict. Eh, Miss Shepperley?

VIOLET. I know a young feller—steward on the *Olympic*——

THE RECTOR [*earnestly*] Seas of life, my child, seas of life! All the cares and the fears—get the drama in! Sing it with your soul! [*He draws his bow across his fiddle and sings with intense earnestness, but slightly out of tune.*] "Give ear unto the mariners——"

JOAN [*on a glance from* MISS SHEPPERLEY, *joining in hastily*]

"And they will plainly show
All the cares and the fears
When the stormy winds do blow."

THE CHOIR [*cautiously*]

"All the *cares* and the *fears*
When the *stormy* winds do *blow*."

THE RECTOR. Ah, that's better!

MISS PYM [*who has markedly abstained from singing*] Oh, well, of course——

VIOLET [*bored*] O God!

MISS PYM [*whirling round on her*] If your mother likes you to take the Almighty's name in vain, Vi'let, with the Rector present, it's no business of mine, I'm aware of that. But it's likewise not my necessity nor my wish to listen—nor to countenance. But it's all of a piece! It's what I've said before, what with your dramatics and your solos, it's time the ladies' choir had a married woman at the head of it. If Mrs. Cobb took her proper place in the parish——

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*through the murmurs of the choir*] Please, Miss Pym—please! We can't have this.

THE CHOIR [*outraged*] Oh, I say!
Miss Pym!
My dear!

No, really, you know——
Stop it, Susannah !
Fair's fair !
Ought to know better——

THE RECTOR [*white*] Miss Pym, I have already many times expressed to the committee of the ladies' choir my own regret and my wife's, my dear wife's regret, that her health——

MISS PYM. We all know about Mrs. Cobb's health.

VIOLET [*bored*] Oh, get on !

MRS. BEWLEY. 'Ush, Vi'let ! If you don't stop it, Susannah——

THE RECTOR. My dear wife's health is too feeble to allow her to take her natural place—a very great regret to her and to me——

JOAN. And to every one, Mr. Cobb. We're all awfully sorry. It must be sickening always to be seedy. [*Murmurs from the choir.*] Shall I try the next verse ?

MISS PYM [*mimicking her voice*] Oh, try it, Miss Joan, try it by all means ; but try it without me. I've something better to do than be taught my F sharps at my time of life by one whose own wife lolls at home and lets another woman do her work for her. [*She picks up her hat and jacket and puts them on as she speaks.*]

MRS. BEWLEY. Now, look here, Susannah, you get off home !

MISS PYM. Oh, no, Mary Bewley, you don't stop me ! I'll have my say or die. We've put up too long with the example set in this parish. Rule a wife and have a wife was my father's motto, and if my mother had treated the parish as Mrs. Cobb treats it, he'ld have known the reason why. Never a smile nor a how-do-you-do for respectable women as can't afford the clothes as Mrs. Cobb wears—no, though they do attend early morning service more regular than the Rector's wife. But there, I daresay a bar parlour's more in 'er line——

VIOLET [*thrilled*] Ooh, I say !

THE RECTOR [*in a suffocated voice*] Miss Pym—Miss Pym—Miss Pym—You must go away. I must ask you to go away.

MISS PYM. Oh, must I ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Yes, Miss Pym, I think so—at once, please !

MRS. BEWLEY. That's right—we're all going. [*A general movement.*] Yes, yes, Miss Shepperley, I'll take her. Time we was all 'ome. A very pleasant evening. Susannah, you come with me—you ought to be ashamed——

MISS PYM [*after thunder, rain*] I don't care ! I don't care what any of you think. I've a right to say my say.

MRS. BEWLEY. Now stop it, Susannah ! Vi'let ! [*They go out.*]

THE CHOIR [*getting themselves away*] G'dnight, Miss Shepperley !

G'night, Mr. Cobb !

G'dnight, Miss Joan !

Thank you for a very pleasant evening, Miss Shepperley !

Thank you, Miss Joan !

Next week as usual, Mr. Cobb ?

Don't you take no notice, Mr. Cobb !

Lord, if you take notice of 'er, Mr. Cobb.

Sorry to hear Mrs. Cobb isn't so well.

G'dnight, Mr. Cobb !

G'dnight, Miss Shepperley !

G'dnight, Miss Joan !

Well, goodnight all ! [*The door shuts on them. A pause.*]

THE RECTOR [*nervously*] Well, I—er—I also had better take my leave.

JOAN. I say, Mr. Cobb—Mr. Cobb, I say—we're horribly sorry. That woman's a pig !

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Joan dear ! [*To the Rector.*] But Joan's right. You mustn't take any notice. We all know Miss Pym.

THE RECTOR. My dear wife will be so much distressed——

JOAN [*eagerly sympathetic*] Don't you tell her, Mr. Cobb. Don't worry her with it.

THE RECTOR [*brightening*] You mean, don't mention—at all—That's an idea, Joan. Eh, Miss Shepperley? A kind thought—a good idea. There's no need, eh, no need whatever to distress my wife—no need to mention it to Lily at all.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I should put it right out of your mind, Mr. Cobb. I wouldn't think of it again.

THE RECTOR. That's another matter, Miss Shepperley. [*Turning away.*] Er—my muffler—I—er——

JOAN. Oh, you must wait for coffee.

THE RECTOR. I shouldn't, Joan. I shouldn't. My wife so much dislikes being left alone—you know she is alone so much.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. How is Mrs. Cobb?

THE RECTOR. Better. A shade better. My dear wife, Miss Shepperley, is, to my thinking, distinctly better, though she finds this heavy weather—the snow, the silence—if I may be permitted a quotation, Miss Shepperley—it quite o'ercrows her spirits.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. It has been bitterly cold.

THE RECTOR. But in spite of that—and that is why I am so anxious that no news of this—er—difficulty should reach her—my dear wife has promised to make an effort—as I tell her, the effort is what is needed, Miss Shepperley, and if she still feels equal to it next Sunday, she is to come to the morning service.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Why that is good news, isn't it, Joan?

THE RECTOR. Isn't it? You are so kind, so friendly. I always say to my dear wife—'If you would permit these dear ladies'—and indeed, Miss Shepperley, it did strike me, if it is not encroaching on your kindness and if you wouldn't consider it involving you in deception, Miss Shepperley, it did occur to me that if you and Miss Joan—I couldn't expect it of Lady Sara, of course, and besides one mustn't overwhelm

Lily—but if you and Miss Joan could, as it were, linger after the service —Lily on these occasions waits in her pew for me while I doff my surplice—so that she and I emerging together might meet you and Miss Joan, in a sense, accidentally——

JOAN. Mr. Cobb, I didn't think you had it in you! Gunpowder treason and plot——

THE RECTOR. No, no, my dear, not a plot! Nothing underhand! You don't understand, Joan. If my dear wife could be led into a little exchange of compliments, that's all, and I, accidentally as it were, should say as we strolled past the gate of the Rectory—'Won't you come in for a few moments?' Well then, Miss Shepperley, then, don't you see, Joan, my wife might second me, she might find herself saying after me—'Yes, won't you come in?' She might, Joan, she might, Miss Shepperley, if her spirits—— That is why I am so anxious that no rumour should reach her of this—er—outburst—I may say—scandalous outburst—of Miss Pym. [*He reaches for his hat.*]

JOAN. Oh, she's not likely to—she never does go out, does she? I haven't seen her in the village, nor to speak to—oh, it must be months. Now, you're not to go, Mr. Cobb! I'll tell mother. [*She goes to the closed door and opens it, letting in red light and laughter.*] Mother! [*You hear answering voices as she disappears.*]

THE RECTOR. It's true. She doesn't get out.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*soothing*] Oh yes, she does. I met her only the other day by the Ponds, though she didn't recognise me, I fancy.

THE RECTOR [*agitated*] The Ponds? Near the Ponds? When did you see her near the Ponds, Miss Shepperley? My wife—you are an old friend, Miss Shepperley—I have my duties—the parish—I cannot always be with her. Oh, Miss Shepperley, if you should ever encounter my wife, walking by herself, near the Ponds——

JOAN [*returning*] Mother says she'll let you go as soon as you've had coffee, Mr. Cobb. They're just finishing dessert.

THE MAID [*at the door*] I've laid in the morning-room, Miss, for you and Miss Joan.

THE RECTOR. Oh, don't let me keep you. It's so good of you to give your dinner hour.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Well, if you'll excuse me. [*As she moves to the door*] Joan!

JOAN. I'm not coming. It's my apple and coffee night.

THE RECTOR. Apple and coffee?

JOAN. I want to be slim. I will be slim. It's so loathsome to be called a fine girl. It's all a question of will power. I love my tummy, that's why I chasten it.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. That's not witty, Joan.

JOAN. No, I was afraid it wasn't. Being witty is like being slim: it's such beastly hard work. [THE RECTOR *smiles uncertainly.* MISS SHEPPERLEY *goes out.*] It's odd how hard one always has to work for one's fun. I haven't touched a chocolate for six months. Sometimes I don't think it's worth it. Do *you* think life's such an easy game?

THE RECTOR. I—I doubt if I ever thought that, Joan.

JOAN. Oh yes, I know you're worried that poor Mrs. Cobb is such an invalid; but that's a fact, isn't it, it isn't a problem? She's just ill and there it is.

THE RECTOR [*sighing*] And there it is! Yes. There it is.

JOAN. What I mean is—older people's lives are settled. They just have to go on doing what they have to go on doing. They haven't to make decisions: they haven't to assume responsibilities. Do you know what I mean?

THE RECTOR. No, Joan. At least, not quite, my dear.

JOAN. Responsibilities for other people. Not children, of course, that's different—grown people.

THE RECTOR [*absently*] Grown people——

JOAN. Mr. Cobb——

THE RECTOR. I beg your pardon, Joan.

JOAN. Is one one's brother's keeper, Mr. Cobb? I always feel on Cain's side.

THE RECTOR. Why, have you been making away with someone? [*He laughs at his joke.*]

JOAN [*ignoring it*] Is one one's brother's keeper? Why? Why should one be? One didn't ask to be. Just because they like you. [*A pause.*] Mr. Cobb, what do you think of Gerry?

THE RECTOR [*left behind*] Gerry? Oh, young Despard!

JOAN. Do you like him?

THE RECTOR. He's a little——

JOAN. Weak. Yes, I know that. Do you like him?

THE RECTOR. He's a very nice fellow, but——

JOAN. Oh, that's just like Father and Mother and every one, even Aunt Ann. I know what you're going to say—they all say it—that it's years since the war, and that even if he did have a bad time he ought to have pulled himself together. Well, he hasn't—quite. I don't believe he ever will—quite. Do you?

THE RECTOR [*with curious earnestness*] I don't like to say that, Joan. You never know. There's always the hope—always the hope.

JOAN. He drinks a little, Mr. Cobb. Did you know that? And there was a girl—I saw him. It was rather hateful. My people don't know about that, of course. But I was furious. I wouldn't speak to him and he hasn't been near me since. But he writes and writes and—I—I was half engaged to him.

THE RECTOR. Hm! It's a pity, Joan.

JOAN. Why? I suppose you'll tell me I could do better.

THE RECTOR [*embarrassed*] Oh, please—my dear child! [*Then*] It's not that.

JOAN. Then what?

THE RECTOR. 'How little do ye think upon the dangers of the seas!' How straight can Gerry steer?

JOAN. Oh, I don't hold any brief for Gerry. He's an utter fool sometimes, but——

THE RECTOR. Then how straight can you steer? Are you fond of him?

JOAN. He's fond of me. And until this happened I—Oh, of course, I'm fond of him or I shouldn't be so worried. My people want me to break it off.

THE RECTOR. 'Give ear unto the mariners——'

JOAN. I—I'm fond of him—I——

THE RECTOR. Break it off!

JOAN. I didn't think you'ld say that. I thought you'ld be the one person who'ld be for poor Gerry. You're a clergyman—don't you believe in love?

THE RECTOR [*embarrassed*] Why—why—I—er——

JOAN. Don't you? 'Suffereth long and is kind,' and all that, like last Sunday? Don't you?

THE RECTOR. Oh yes.

JOAN. Well, then!

THE RECTOR [*hedging*] When I say break it off, I—I'm taking the prudent side, Joan. A clergyman—responsibility—I've no right to advise otherwise. I like Gerry. I believe in Gerry. But——

JOAN. Oh, but, but, but! Didn't you marry because you fell in love, Mr. Cobb? I'm not being impertinent, I'm just asking you. I'm at my wits' end with worry. Gerry writes and writes: and sometimes he says he won't let me, that he's accursed—you know—hysterical—and sometimes he says if I'ld marry him he'ld stiffen up. I'm not sentimental: I'm not Victorian: I want to be prudent: I want to do the right thing. What is the right thing? Didn't you marry for love?

THE RECTOR [*deeply embarrassed*] I—er——

JOAN. Won't you tell me? Didn't you?

THE RECTOR. I suppose I did.

JOAN. Is it true that it dies out after a month or two like they say?

THE RECTOR. I'm afraid it does with a good many people.

JOAN. Did it with you, Mr. Cobb?

THE RECTOR. I—er—No!

JOAN. Is——? Were——? Are you——? Do you feel——? Is it the same love that it always was?

THE RECTOR. I can't—er——

JOAN. Is it more or less?

THE RECTOR (*cornered*] More.

JOAN. That's what I wanted to know.

LADY SARA *comes in. She is a pleasant, middle-aged, unnecessary woman, charmingly dressed. The half-opened door of the dining-room lets in the sound of laughter and talk.*

LADY SARA. Why, Mr. Cobb, nice to see you. How did the practice go? We'll have coffee in a minute. [*She rings the bell.*] Joan, for heaven's sake open the windows! Humanity! Let's get a little air in. You can shut them again. [JOAN *obeys: then she curls herself on the sofa*] Oh, my poor chrysanthemums! It was Violet Bewley that knocked them over, wasn't it? Dreadful young woman! Voice like a pea-hen! Figure like a tank! Why you have her in the choir—— I heard her voice all through dinner.

THE RECTOR. That was Miss Pym, I fancy, Lady Sara. We—we had—er—considerable difficulty with Miss Pym's F sharp.

THE MAID *who has brought in coffee, goes round the room, restoring order.*

LADY SARA. Coffee, Mr. Cobb?

THE RECTOR. Thank you—I really—When I have drunk this one cup—My wife is alone, she will be expecting me.

LADY SARA. Ah, how is Mrs. Cobb ? Joan, pull down your skirt !

THE RECTOR. There is some talk between us of her coming to church on Sunday, if the weather——

LADY SARA. Ah, the snow doesn't suit her. Bilious, eh ? Same effect on my sister-in-law—yellows her. As I told her this morning, it physically and mentally yellows her. Joan, just go and tell Elizabeth to bring in the big Cona. [JOAN *goes out*] Whenever we have a large party, Mr. Cobb, she invariably brings in the smallest size. And to-night my husband brought home Sir James Ludlow and a friend of Sir James', quite unexpectedly, Bell, Dr. Bell, the germ man. You know, hydrophobia, or is it diabetes ?

THE RECTOR. Malaria, I fancy.

LADY SARA. You are wonderful. Joan ! Oh, she's gone. Oh, Mr. Cobb, Joan has been talking to you ? I fancied she'd been crying. No ? No, I suppose not. She's so appallingly unemotional. But she has been talking to you, eh ? Did she say anything about that dreadful Despard boy ? I hoped she would. We're all so worried. You know what Joan is when her mind's made up. But up till now, I'm gratified to think, she doesn't seem to have made it up. Not that she talks to me : they never do nowadays : the mother has to stand aside. But, you know, Mr. Cobb, she mustn't marry him : she mustn't do it. Oh, I know, pity is akin to love and all that : and he did get the M.C. But she mustn't do it. He never looks you straight in the eye—and then this nervous twitch ! Oh, I know it's the war—not his fault, poor fellow ! But——

THE RECTOR. I hear he's very fond of her.

LADY SARA. Clings to her, literally. It's all the wrong way round. As I said to my sister-in-law this morning—when I was young *we* did the clinging.

JOAN *comes in, followed by her father,* GEORGE SHEPPERLEY, SIR JAMES FOWLER *and* DR. LUDLOW BELL. GEORGE SHEP-

PERLEY *is the husband of* LADY SARA, *and bald.* SIR JAMES *is portly, loud speaking, pleased with life and himself.* DR. BELL *is a dark, twinkling, observant person, with a quiet decided manner. The two men are of an age, and obviously more intimate with each other than they are with the Shepperleys.*

THE MAID *puts the second Cona on a table beside* LADY SARA.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Hullo, Cobb, glad to see you!

LADY SARA [*absorbed in the Cona*] Mr. Cobb, you've not met Sir James Fowler—Dr. Ludlow Bell.

THE RECTOR [*hurriedly*] I—er—really I am afraid I must be going. My wife—all alone. I promised her—my wife, that I would not be late, and here I am—half an hour gone. And I have to call in at the Sanders' —I fear the old lady is very ill. This influenza is a scourge: indeed I say to my parishioners that we must accept it *as* a scourge. His ways are not our ways.

DR. BELL. Who's your man down here?

MR. SHEPPERLEY. A Dr. Franks.

LADY SARA. I must send down some grapes and things.

JOAN. Oh, I took some down this morning.

THE RECTOR. Oh, you mustn't do that, Joan—highly infectious.

JOAN. What about you, Mr. Cobb? Just as infectious for you! Isn't it, Dr. Bell?

DR. BELL. If people are sensible, disinfect themselves, don't overwork and undereat—Still I wouldn't let her play about in the cottages just now, Lady Sara.

LADY SARA. Let her? The modern daughter! It's a question of what she lets me. Oh, good-night, Mr. Cobb!

THE RECTOR. Good-night, Lady Sara! Good-night, Joan! Good-night, Mr. Shepperley! Good-night, Jimmy—Sir James! I—er—Good-night! [*He backs out in confusion as* MISS SHEPPERLEY *enters. There is an embarassment for the moment, in the doorway, and he is gone.*]

MR. SHEPPERLEY [*laughing*] Jimmy, eh ? Typical, that.

DR. BELL. That little man will be down with flu himself if he doesn't look out.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. He works himself to death in the parish.

DR. BELL. His face was curiously familiar. What did you say his name was ?

JOAN. The Reverend Benjamin Cobb—bless his poor little heart !

SIR JAMES. Cobb ? Cobb ? Where did I know a Cobb ? Not Benjamin ! Gad, Bell, it's Benjy !

DR. BELL. That's it ! It's Benjy !

SIR JAMES. I wouldn't have known him.

LADY SARA. So you know him, Sir James ? How interesting !

SIR JAMES. Know him ! I had rooms below him at Trinity.

DR. BELL. I was at school with him. He was head of the house.

SIR JAMES. He was the most brilliant classic of his year. Lord, how times flies ! I was always sorry I lost sight of him. What's he doing down here ?

MR. SHEPPERLEY. He's the local parson. They live over the way. A cigar, Bell ?

DR. BELL. Thanks.

SIR JAMES. The local parson ! Benjy Cobb ? I should have thought they'ld have made him a bishop by now. Everyone said he'd the ball at his feet. What happened to him !

DR. BELL. I'm beginning to remember. Wasn't there some story—— ?

LADY SARA. The barmaid ! Ah !

DR. BELL. What ! Not Lily Pierce ? Lord, he didn't marry her ?

JOAN. Oh, so that was what Miss Pym meant !

DR. BELL. Oh, but she wasn't a barmaid.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Hotel-keeper's daughter, wasn't that it ? We heard so.

DR. BELL. Semi-superior—end of the 'nineties—knew how to dress. You know the type. Out to marry or—— [*He breaks off.*]

JOAN. Burn!

LADY SARA. Tsh! Joan!

SIR JAMES. She was a most attractive woman—then.

LADY SARA. She's a perfectly impossible woman—now.

SIR JAMES [*to* DR. BELL] Look here, we must go over and see him—go to-morrow.

DR. BELL. Early then! We must catch the ten o'clock.

JOAN. I'll take you! Mr. Cobb was saying something about a call. Yes, actually an invitation!

LADY SARA. She'll be rude to you, Joan. Oh, of course, with you men—old acquaintances—if you make it a call on her—but I don't think you ought to go, Joan. You mustn't think us uncharitable, Sir James. We'ld have put up with her, of course, if it had only been that she's underbred, but the fact is she has the temper of a fishwife——

SIR JAMES [*uncomfortably*] Do you know, I don't remember Lily as more than—er—rather high-spirited.

LADY SARA. Ah! You're a man! Do you remember, Ann, that ladies' committee when every woman in the house got up and walked out except you?

JOAN. But that's no credit to you, Aunt Ann. You'ld get on with the devil incarnate.

LADY SARA [*plaintive*] Joan!

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I'm afraid I wasn't able to get on with Mrs. Cobb.

LADY SARA. Why did he ever marry her? But then I always wonder why people ever do marry people.

SIR JAMES [*interested*] I know what you mean. [JOAN *giggles.*]

MR. SHEPPERLEY [*hastily*] Good-looking woman! Went to his head, I suppose, like bad champagne.

JOAN [*wrinkling her nose*] Bad champagne makes me sick. I don't understand men.

LADY SARA [*plaintive*] Joan!

MISS SHEPPERLEY. He was such a mere boy: such a learned—youngster.

LADY SARA. Heavens, how intellectual his sermons were! All Greek derivation and the Athanasian Creed! What with his sermons and her vulgarity, you can imagine they weren't liked.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Still, he weathered it.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Cobb's no fool, if he is a parson.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I always thought, after that dreadful flare-up, when the vestry nearly asked him to resign——

LADY SARA. Only George and all of them were such cowards. Not one of them had the nerve to tackle him.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Well, I ask you—How could one give his wife as the reason?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. But he guessed. He did control her after that.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. 'Bout time. I've no use for a man who isn't master in his own house.

LADY SARA. Put some more coals on, George! [*He does so.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You can't say she disturbs the village much nowadays.

JOAN. It's jolly hard luck on him, having to do his wife's work as well as his own. Look at him to-night!

LADY SARA. And how they manage I don't know. Two hundred and fifty a year, you know, and occasional collections.

SIR JAMES [*He gets up worriedly*] But look here! Something ought to be done. I used to know them both. [*He appeals to* DR. BELL *with a look.* BELL *nods.*]

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Not easy people to help.

LADY SARA [*rattling on*] And no servant will stay with them. The

girls all say the same thing—she's kind to them till she's crossed, but they're afraid for their lives when she's in one of her fits.

JOAN. Yet they half admire her, you know. Remember Violet Bewley? 'Ah, the pore dear! She's a fair terror, the pore dear!'

LADY SARA. Now, Joan, that's enough!

JOAN. Mother, that's exactly how Mrs. Bewley talks to Violet—'Now, Vi'let, come off it!'

LADY SARA [*plaintively*] George!

MR. SHEPPERLEY [*well-trained*] Yes—er—what about a game of billiards? [*The men rise.*]

LADY SARA. Won't you take your coffee with you? I'll come along and watch you for half an hour before I go to bed. [*She goes out with them but comes back to say:*] Joan, you won't be up late?

JOAN [*calmly*] I expect so, Mother. [*She begins gathering her materials together—drawing-board, pencils and so forth.*]

LADY SARA [*dissatisfied, hovering*] I do think in your Father's house you ought to consider the electric light.

JOAN. Dearest Mother, if you'll reckon off how much the extra electric light costs that I use, I'll write a cheque for it at once and give it to Father, and Father will be furious. I want to sit up and work, dearest, and I shall go on wanting to sit up and work, and I'm twenty three and I'm earning three hundred a year.

LADY SARA. Yes, but Joan——

JOAN. Well, think it over, darling!

LADY SARA. You're so rude, Joan.

JOAN. You're so unreasonable, Mother.

LADY SARA. I don't expect you to criticise me, Joan.

JOAN. No, darling, I know that's the idea.

LADY SARA. You don't get down to breakfast till everything's cold.

JOAN. Never, darling! When I feel I'm as late as that I have breakfast in bed.

LADY SARA. I don't approve of breakfast in bed. I like to see you there. It never occurs to you to allow for a mother's feelings.

JOAN. It isn't feelings, darling. It's love of bossing. I know just how you feel. I'm your daughter. Look at your hand! You'ld just love to hit me, wouldn't you—to hit me hard?

LADY SARA. Joan, how can you be so—so devilish?

JOAN. Good night, Mother darling! [*She gives her a hug of genuine affection.*]

LADY SARA. D'you love your mother, Joan?

JOAN [*with conviction*] Yes, I do, Mother!

LADY SARA. Joan, you won't keep the light on too late, will you?

JOAN [*with even more conviction*] Yes, I shall, Mother! [LADY SARA *goes out.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*watching the little scene*] Joan, how can you torment your mother so?

JOAN [*busy*] It's good for her, Aunt Ann. Mother needs keeping down.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You never do it to me.

JOAN. You don't need it. You need gingering, like Father. I always encourage you and Father.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You'll be a holy terror when you're fifty.

JOAN. Yes, I'm afraid so. I don't see how it's to be avoided unless I marry. Marriage would be admirable for a character like me. If I married someone like Gerry, that is.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Are you going to, Joan?

JOAN. I don't know, Aunt Ann.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You'll upset them dreadfully if you do.

JOAN. That doesn't matter. It's good for Mother to be upset. It's myself I'm thinking of. I want to have a good time. I shouldn't have a good time if I married Gerry.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. If I didn't know you, I should say that your lack of reticence is only equalled by your cold-bloodedness.

JOAN. Yes, but you do know me, so what's the good of saying things like that ? You wish you were me really—able to be frank. Aunt Ann, d'you know what you ought to have done, years ago—in fact you might still—you ought to have taken a lover.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. My dear Joan !

JOAN. It would be so good for you. Much better than marrying. The excitement of being wicked and abandoned would make you regularly blossom. It would give you—er—er—what's the word ? It's French. What is the word ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*hastily*] I don't want to know.

JOAN. That's just it. You ought to want to know. It's not natural, not to be curious. Now I do know most things. [*Thoughtfully.*] It's amazing what I know.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*sharply*] What have you been up to, Joan ?

JOAN. Reading.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Reading who ?

JOAN. Freud.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*relieved*] Oh, him !

JOAN [*wrinkling her forehead*] I've been psycho-analysing myself, and I know what I need. I don't need a lover : I need the discipline of marriage. And yet I don't know : it means giving up such a lot.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Girls weren't so prudent when I was young.

JOAN. Girls couldn't make a comfortable living dress designing when you were young.

THE MAID [*in the doorway*] If you please, ma'am, could I speak to you for a minute ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. What is it ?

THE MAID. There's no bath-towels in the spare-rooms and Alice is out.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I'll come. [*The maid disappears as she moves to the door.*]

JOAN. Mother is lazy. Why can't she run her own house ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I don't mind. It gives me something to do.

JOAN. Don't you sometimes long for a place of your own ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*lightly*] Sometimes.

JOAN. I wonder you stick it here. Don't you get sick of running errands for Mother and pottering about the parish with Mr. Cobb ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I was brought up to it. I'm comfortable. Besides, I wasn't taught dress designing when I was young.

JOAN. Why didn't you make them have you taught ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I can't draw.

JOAN. No, but something ? I insisted on being educated properly

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MISS SHEPPERLEY. My darling child, don't always be in the right. [*She goes out.*]

JOAN [*chuckling good-humouredly*] Come back !

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*in the distance*] It's less strenuous in here.

Still chuckling, JOAN *lights a cigarette and, at a loose end, wanders off to the piano and with one finger begins picking out the tune that she has been singing earlier in the evening. Her face grows grave as she does so. She stops : her brow puckers. Then she shuts up the piano with a bang, wanders over to the sofa, picks up her board and settles down to work. She is soon so absorbed that she does not at first hear a tap at the window.*

JOAN [*as the tapping is repeated*] Come in ! [*There is another tap*] Come in, can't you ?

GERRY DESPARD *pushes open the window. He is a sallow-faced, restless young man, likable and annoying.*

JOAN. Well, what is it ? [*lifting her head*] Gerry ! Where have you sprung from ?

GERRY [*bearing down upon her*] Look here, Joan——

JOAN [*with the irritation that he always produces in anyone who has not seen him for a day or two*] Why didn't you ring at the door? Lord, won't you ever behave like other people?

GERRY [*sulkily*] I wasn't going to barge into the crowd. I can go if you don't want me.

JOAN [*getting up*] Oh, don't be so silly! Why, you're frozen, you're covered with snow. Take off your coat this minute!

GERRY. Oh, chuck it, Joan! Don't fuss!

JOAN [*moving over to the coffee-table and lighting the spirit-lamp as she talks*] I'm not going to have you laid up with flu. It's bad enough with half the village down. It's all right, they're all at billiards. Take it off! [*He does so.*] At least you've had the sense to wear your pull-over. Is it comfy? I'm rather proud of that stitch.

GERRY. It's all right, Joan!

JOAN [*busy at the Cona*] Half a second!

GERRY. What are you fiddling with?

JOAN. Coffee. Have you had any dinner?

GERRY. Look here, I've come here to talk to you.

JOAN. Have you had any dinner?

GERRY. Look here, did you mean all those things you wrote, because——

JOAN. Have you had any dinner?

GERRY. No, I have not had any dinner.

JOAN. I thought not. Watch that! [*She goes into the next room and returns with a plateful of rolls.*] You'll jolly well eat one of those at once! They're all right, they're sausage rolls. I made 'em.

GERRY. I don't want your beastly sausage rolls. Look here, Joan——

JOAN. Eat it up!

GERRY. You are a devil. [*He eats while she in silence extinguishes the spirit-lamp, pours out the coffee and puts it on the table beside him: all*

this in disapproving silence. Then she turns to the mantelpiece, selects a cigarette and lights it.]

JOAN. Cigarette ?

GERRY. No.

JOAN stands with her back to him, elbows on the mantelpiece, staring into the glass. She hums jauntily.

JOAN. Ye gentlemen of England——

GERRY. Joan !

She stops humming and gives him a quick look.

GERRY. Joan, aren't you going to—— [*He breaks off.*]

JOAN. What ?

GERRY. I dunno. [*A pause.*]

JOAN [*half turning*] What have you come here for, Gerry ?

GERRY. You haven't answered my letters.

JOAN. Did you expect me to ?

GERRY. No.

JOAN. You do such childish things—to come prowling round the house like a thief. I suppose you think it's romantic. I call it silly.

GERRY [*sulkily*] I thought if I came to the door I'ld be told you couldn't see me.

JOAN. You know perfectly well you didn't think anything of the kind. Besides, if you thought that you ought to have had the guts to keep away.

GERRY. Well, I didn't keep away—see ! I didn't keep away.

JOAN. That's pretty obvious, isn't it ? [*A pause.*]

GERRY. Joan !

JOAN [*not turning*] Well, what ?

GERRY. Joan !

JOAN. It's no good, Gerry, I will not be sentimental.

GERRY. Joan !

JOAN [*with a choke in her voice*] Oh ! [*She turns sharply : they kiss.*]

GERRY. Joan, it's been awful.

JOAN. Oh, yes, yes.

GERRY. Did you miss me ?

JOAN. Yes.

GERRY. You didn't mean those things you wrote, did you ?

JOAN. Yes, I did, I did. It's no good, Gerry. You can talk and you can talk, but I won't marry you. I can't marry you. I've got to think of myself. I don't love you enough to stand it. I've something better to do. [*She flounces away to the sofa.*]

GERRY. I see.

JOAN. I'm a worker. I like it. But you—you just prowl around like—like all the hosts of Midian. Why don't you get a job ? I've got a job.

GERRY. How old were you on Armistice night ?

JOAN. You know how old I was. I was sixteen.

GERRY. I was twenty-two. Had you got a job then ?

JOAN. Of course I hadn't. I was still at school. I hadn't begun.

GERRY. I was finished.

JOAN. Other people weren't finished. Other people got jobs.

GERRY [*standing over her gesticulating*] Well, I can't help it, I didn't. What's the use of going over it ? Haven't I tried to get another ?

JOAN. Yes, you've been trying for four years.

GERRY. Well, I got two, didn't I ?

JOAN. How long did you keep 'em ?

GERRY. Could I help it that they said I wasn't suitable ?

JOAN. Well, all I know is I've got a job and you haven't. And everybody says that people like you——

GERRY. What sort of a job would you be getting if it hadn't been for people like me ?

JOAN. Oh, Gerry, don't whine ! I didn't make your old war.

GERRY. Did I ?

JOAN. Did anyone ? Besides, that's not the point. It's over, it's past. Why can't you put it behind you ?

GERRY [*walking up and down*] Well, I can't. It makes one restless. It's that or it's you or—I don't know what it is. Oh, I know you're right. Sometimes I say to myself—Chuck it ! Clear out ! Chuck the whole business !

JOAN. Gerry ! [*She catches his hand as he passes her.*]

GERRY. Well, I haven't got much to live for, have I, if you turn me down. But if I'd got you to come home to——

JOAN. It's not sense, Gerry.

GERRY. God knows it's not sense, but—— [*He flings himself down on the couch beside her, catching at her knees.*] Oh, Joan, look here ! Listen to me ! If you chuck me I——

JOAN [*facing him*] I don't know what to do for you. Why did you go to that silly place and spend your money and look as you did ? You were all pink and swimmy, and hanging on to that hateful girl. You don't know what you looked like. What do you do it for ? Why do you drink too much ? What do you get out of it ? You told me you never saw that girl before and yet you were kissing her. I never want to drink too much and kiss strange men. Why should you do—common things, just because you're a man ? You do things I hate, silly and vulgar and disgusting things, and then you expect me to forget all about it and like you still just because you're a man. I don't want to marry someone I'm ashamed of.

GERRY [*sullenly drawing away*] I didn't come here to be preached at.

JOAN. Well, you needn't come here. I didn't ask you to. [*She puts her hand on his, drawing him round to her*] Oh, Gerry, Gerry darling, I don't want to be a beast ; but I'm so sick and tired of—of making excuses. What do you expect me to say ? Why did you come ?

GERRY. God knows !

JOAN. Don't you always pile it on to God. Don't you know yourself? Why did you?

GERRY [*not looking at her*] I suppose I—just wanted to. [*She puts out her hand impulsively and his closes over it.*]

JOAN [*wistfully*] Sometimes I think—any woman would do.

GERRY [*unresisting*] I daresay. [*A pause*] Joan—honest—I think I've got a job.

JOAN [*thrilled*] Oh, Gerry!

GERRY. At least, I've met a man who knows a man——

JOAN [*comically despairing*] Oh, Gerry!

GERRY [*getting up roughly, shaking off her detaining hand*] There, you see! You don't even give me credit—— What was that?

JOAN. Oh, my poor Gerry, how nervy you are! You mustn't jump like that. What was it?

GERRY. Something in the garden. There's someone at the window. [*He goes to the window*] You, there, I say! Joan, it's the old man—it's Cobb. [*He opens the window and* THE RECTOR *enters and stands confused, blinking in the light.* GERRY *goes on*] I say, sir, what's the matter? Nothing wrong?

THE RECTOR [*not looking at them—a fumbling, stumbling figure*] Seeing the light on still—so late—I don't want to disturb—but seeing the light——

JOAN. But what has happened, Mr. Cobb?

THE RECTOR. My wife—I—my wife——

JOAN [*swiftly*] Aunt Ann's in the next room. Get her! [*But before* GERRY *can move* THE RECTOR *breaks in: he has recovered himself.*]

THE RECTOR. Yes, your Aunt Ann. It's nothing, Joan—children, both of you. But I should like a word with Miss Shepperley—with your Aunt Ann. There's nothing the matter.

JOAN [*at the door, calling*] Aunt Ann, are you there? Here's Mr. Cobb come back. He wants to see you. [THE RECTOR *goes out and she*

shuts the door] Now wasn't that queer? What's happened, d'you think?

GERRY. Wife ill?

JOAN. But he'ld have said. Why shouldn't he have said? What on earth—it's quite late. He did look queer.

GERRY. Is that what you call it? Don't you know what a man looks like when he's been——

JOAN. What?

GERRY. Knocked out. Bullet in him. But I know. I've seen it—often. They look just like that. But you—what do you know?

JOAN [*indignantly*] Gerry!

GERRY. Well?

JOAN. You're being awfully unkind.

GERRY. Am I? Sorry. I oughtn't to have come. Good-night, my sweet!

JOAN. You're not to go like that.

GERRY [*at the window*] Good-night!

JOAN. Gerry—I'm not sure—I'll think about it—I'll write.

GERRY. What's the good? [*He goes out.*]

JOAN. But I didn't mean— [MISS SHEPPERLEY *comes in quickly*] Oh, Aunt Ann, what is it?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. What d'you think? What d'you suppose that woman's done now? She's been in one of her rages and she's locked him out of the house. Joan, if you laugh I'll kill you—in this weather—he's drenched to the skin—telling me he wouldn't have bothered us if he'd had the keys of the church with him, and would we give him a chair by the fire because he's got to be off early—she'ld be wanting him.

JOAN. Did he tell you himself that she——?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Of course not. Pretended he couldn't make her hear; that she must have fallen asleep. He thought he was most con-

vincing. Joan, I'm a calm woman, but it's more than I can stand to watch. That man lives in hell.

JOAN. Why doesn't he leave her ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. He's a clergyman.

JOAN. But even then——

MISS SHEPPERLEY. She'ld never let him. It's the usual thing—the fatal thing—the weak one dragging down the strong one and so they both drown. I've watched them for years.

JOAN. I know—I watch too——

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*harshly*] You—you're the younger generation—what's it got to do with you ?

JOAN. Oh, Aunt Ann, don't you see ? The other way round ! Would it end like that if I marry Gerry ?

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

ACT II.

It is some eight or nine hours later and the audience is now looking at the Rectory dining-room. The right and left walls of it meet at the back of the stage so that the room is seen as a triangle. Through the French window on the right wall you catch a glimpse of the porch of the front door. On the left wall, towards the back of the stage, is an inner door opening on the central passage that runs from front to back of the house: on the same wall, opposite the window, is a fireplace with a horsehair armchair in front of it, and beyond the fireplace again, pulled out at an angle from the wall, is a sofa: exactly opposite the sofa on the right wall is a shabby writing-desk. In the centre of the room is an oblong table with a sewing machine on it and a litter of dress-making. A red dummy with a half-trimmed hat stuck on it stands in a dark corner at the back beyond the window. On the walls hang a couple of school and college groups framed in light oak: there is also a heart-shaped shield with a college coat-of-arms, and two silver cups stand on the mantelpiece, surrounded by indifferent ornaments. Behind the desk are some bookshelves.

The curtain goes up on a dark stage, for the shutters are closed in front of the window. The only illumination is a shaft of light that cuts in through the central crack. There is dead silence. Presently an alarum rings somewhere in the house. Then are heard footsteps of coming downstairs. The door opens and Lily Cobb *comes in.*

She is a middle-aged woman who has once been good-looking. She still has fine features and a rope of dull yellow hair. She wears an elaborately belaced and beribboned nightgown, and over it a dressing-gown of the

latest cut, cut at home. She holds a candle in her hand. Her feet are bare. She crosses to the window, hesitates for a moment, then lifts the iron cross-bar and pushes back the shutters. Grey daylight floods the room: you see more clearly how shabby and comfortless it is. She puts down the candle on the desk and then waits, leaning against the curtain, almost as if she were in ambush. Nothing happens. With an irritable gesture she turns again to the window and opens it hastily and roughly: indeed it is noticeable that, though all her movements have a certain large impetuous grace, she handles everything roughly: chairs, window, the utensils of the meal that follows, everything is touched as if it were opposing her, as if it bore her a grudge. She stands on the open threshold searching the front garden with her eyes. Presently she cries impatiently:

Benjy, are you there ?

and then coaxingly—it is odd to hear the tone on the lips of this haggard, middle-aged woman:

Benjy dear ! Oh, Benjy !

There is no answer. She sighs angrily. Then, pulling her gown about her, as if she were cold, she turns back into the room and, crossing it, hesitates by the fireplace with its relic of last night's fire and stoops, a hand stretched out to the hearth-brush. Then up goes her head with a toss: " Why should I ? *" is as clear as if she spoke it, and out she sweeps leaving the door open behind her. Once again the wretched room is left to explain itself to the cold-eyed winter daylight.*

Then, crisping up the path—you can hear his tread and his cheerful humming before you see him at the window—comes The Rector. *He brightens as he sees the window open, comes briskly in, rubbing his hands, takes off his coat and hat, trots across to the door, hangs up his belongings on pegs visible in the passage, and disappears for a moment, only to trot back, more briskly than ever, with a housemaid's box in one hand and some newspapers in the other. Then he turns*

back the worn hearthrug, shifts the fender, and gets to work on the grate, still humming as he does so the tune that has been running in his head, it seems, all night. THE RECTOR *looks more haggard and shabby than ever by day; his cold is obviously worse. His wife, who has stolen downstairs again, enters silently and now stands in the doorway, her head flung back against her outstretched arm that catches at the woodwork of the door. Her first emotion at seeing him is intense relief, that is clear; but presently her foot begins to tap.*

THE RECTOR. "Give ear unto the mariners,
And they shall plainly show
All the cares and the fears——"

LILY. Oh, do stop that everlasting humming!

THE RECTOR. Lily! I beg your pardon. Good morning, my dear!

LILY. So you're back, are you? Where did you go for the night?

THE RECTOR. They were still up at Lady Sara's.

LILY. Oh, you've got plenty of friends I know. They must have thought you a fool. Perhaps it'll teach you to keep your word another time, saying you'ld be in at nine, and then keeping me sitting here waiting and waiting—not even the wireless; but you'll screw out money somehow for the village hall wireless. Yes, you did, you gave ten shillings. Do you think that's fair to me? You needn't think it's generous: it's I who suffer so that you can be generous. And so—and so I thought for once I'd teach you. [*She comes down the room and pauses at the table watching him. He does not answer*] I hope it has. [*No answer*] Oh, for God's sake, say something!

THE RECTOR [*pleasantly, as he straightens himself and rolls back the hearth-rug*] Yes, my dear, yes! D'you know, Lily, I think—I think we want our breakfast.

LILY. Well, it's all ready on the tray. I put it out last night. I thought I might as well, sitting here waiting and waiting with nothing to do. [*But it is an attempt at reconciliation that he recognises.*]

THE RECTOR [*very pleased*] Now that was thoughtful. [*He begins moving the machine.*]

LILY. More than some people are! Be careful! It's all pinned. [*She takes the materials and the machine from him and dumps them on his desk. He pulls open the table drawer and takes out a tablecloth. She comes back quickly*] Here, I'll do that! You get the tray. [*She tosses the cloth on to the table and, when he returns, rapidly deals out the tray load of utensils—plates, bread, teapot, etc.—which he has brought.*]

THE RECTOR [*lighting the little spirit kettle*] Nothing like breakfast. Come, my dear! [*He pulls out the chair for her.*]

LILY. You get on with yours. I don't want any.

THE RECTOR [*still with the chair in his hand, and speaking for the first time with a note of authority*] Oh, yes.

LILY. I don't want any, I tell you! [*But she flounces into her place.*]

THE RECTOR [*in sudden agitation*] You've come down again without any shoes!

LILY. I'm all right. [*But he fusses to the hearth for a pair of her slippers that are drying there and puts them on for her, while she repeats peevishly*] I tell you I'm all right.

THE RECTOR. Can't have you catching cold. [*He pours out tea for her and himself and helps them both from the corner of cold bacon.*]

LILY. You know I never catch cold. [*She eyes him furtively*] I suppose you got a fresh one last night. It'll be my fault, of course—oh, of course! [*Sharply, as he pushes his plate aside*] Why don't you eat your bacon?

THE RECTOR [*coughing*] I'm not hungry. [*He drinks thirstily.*]

LILY. You always turn up your nose at things. Can I help it if it's bad? They always save me the worst in the shop, just because we can't afford the best cut. It's that Sanders woman—it's pure spite. Always the same wherever I go—rude, impertinent——

THE RECTOR. They're so disorganised—the old lady's down with flu, you know. But I'll speak to Sanders about it.

LILY. I can see you speaking to Sanders about it! As if you didn't let everyone put on you—and me. Oh, I'm sick of it all!

THE RECTOR [*remonstrating*] Lily! Lily!

There is a pause. She stares in front of her. One hand is sprawled across the table, playing with the knife and fork: her other lies idle. THE RECTOR *continues the pretence of eating. Presently his hand slips out along the tablecloth and closes over hers.*

LILY [*starting up*] Let me alone, can't you! D'you hear me? Take your hateful hand away or I'll—— [*The knife flashes in her hand.*]

THE RECTOR [*on his feet, strangely*] Lily!

LILY. I——

THE RECTOR [*with an odd coaxing smile*] Now put that down, eh? [*She gives him a hunted look: the knife drops from her hand. She pushes him aside and goes over to the sofa, her hands held in front of her like a blind woman, and collapses upon it. He follows her and sitting beside her draws her head on to his shoulder. She does not resist*] What am I to do with you, Lily? We're too old for this sort of thing.

LILY [*She turns in his arms, catching at his shoulders as if she were dragging herself out of some deep pit*] Benjy, what is it? What comes over me?

THE RECTOR. I don't know, my darling! But we'll fight it.

LILY. O God, you've been saying that for twenty years.

THE RECTOR [*stoutly*] Well, so we are fighting it.

LILY. It doesn't happen quite as often. Does it?

THE RECTOR. Of course it doesn't.

LILY. Benjy—last night—I didn't mean to do it, I tell you; but you didn't come and you didn't come—and I sat thinking of all these years here, and what a beast to me every one is, just because I won't let myself be talked to as if I were dirt——

THE RECTOR. Lily, it's not so.

LILY. It is so! D'you think I don't know when people look down on me? D'you think I don't know what they say? But you can go anywhere—they're nice enough to you. But you were staying there enjoying yourself—I could hear the music across the road—and I thought—I thought—I'll teach him to go away from me! I'll teach him to neglect me! Oh, you don't understand—something gets hold of you: you get so angry you don't feel human. You've not got my nature—you'll never understand.

THE RECTOR [*in a low voice*] Dearest—dearest—I do try. [*There is a silence.*]

LILY [*at last, childishly*] Benjy—I didn't mean—'your hateful hand.' [*He smiles; his arms go round her and they cling to each other. After a pause*] Benjy—last night at Lady Sara's, did you tell them——? You're a clergyman, you couldn't tell a lie, could you? Did you tell them—what I did to you last night?

THE RECTOR. I told them I couldn't make you hear. They took it quite naturally.

LILY. So you didn't give me away. Did they give you a bed?

THE RECTOR. And a bath—and a cup of tea. There!

LILY. Ah, they've got money and servants. And you didn't give me away. Benjy, I will be good: I'll do anything you want.

THE RECTOR. Will you, Lily? Lily!

LILY. Yes?

THE RECTOR. They're nice people over the way: they mean so kindly. Miss Shepperley——

LILY. Yes, you're always contrasting me with Miss Shepperley. I see you doing it. D'you think I like to see her taking my place?

THE RECTOR [*hopefully*] Lily! Does that mean that you begin to feel like—taking things up again?

LILY. Mothers' meetings? Thank you! Is that what you want?

Oh, you are persistent! It's no good, Benjy. I'm not cut out for a parson's wife. Why you were ever such a fool as to marry me—or I you—or I you! O God, if we'd only got a little money—get away—get a little life!

THE RECTOR. Well, my dear, that's the point. Miss Shepperley was suggesting——

LILY. Oh, you and your Miss Shepperley!

THE RECTOR [*with a flash*] Will you listen, Lily? [*She softens instantly, if he could but see it; but he is already penitent*] I'm sorry, my dear—I'm sorry! [*A pause*] Look here, Lily, Miss Shepperley and that nice child, Joan——

LILY. Well, what about the 'naice chaild'? That rotten Despard boy's after her. That'll be a come-down for Lady Sara.

THE RECTOR. Lily, don't! She was saying last night that now you seemed so much better in health——

LILY. My health! I love the way you lie to people. Why don't you tell them you're ashamed of me?

THE RECTOR [*smiling at her*] That would be a lie. [*Then, uncomfortably*] But I don't like to feel that in the matter of your health I have been equivocating, but I looked on it as a mere formula.

LILY. Well, after all, it's no more than the sort of thing you say every week in the pulpit.

THE RECTOR [*again the flash*] Lily—wait a minute! I thought it was understood between us that whatever complaints—and I daresay—I'm quite sure—justified complaints, you may have against me as a—as a—as myself, I will not allow you to include—or asperse—my calling.

LILY. Well, as if you believed the things you say! That's why I never come to church, for fear I'ld burst out laughing at you cocked up there gabbling away (*imitating him*)—'When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive!'

THE RECTOR. I do believe it. He shall save his soul alive.

LILY. Alive! Dead—alive! Much living I've had out of it. If I'd gone my way I could have had some fun. But no—you had to interfere. Well, I hope you've enjoyed plucking a brand from the burning. I am a trophy, aren't I? I always wonder you don't trot me out on Mission Sundays.

THE RECTOR [*going up to her*] My dear—my dearest—must you do this to us?

LILY [*the devil dying out of her face*] Must I? Why must I? No, no, Benjy! I mustn't. I don't know why I said it. Go on! Talk to me! Tell me about Joan! I've never disliked Joan Shepperley. My hair was just that colour when I was a girl. Jim Fowler—do you remember Jim Fowler?—he used to call me—what was it? Demeter or something. The colour goes as one gets older. Everything goes as one gets older. What about Joan?

THE RECTOR. She—they all wanted to know if you didn't feel well enough, perhaps, for a little call.

LILY. Did you ask her to call?

THE RECTOR. We were just chatting. You know how a thing comes up.

LILY. You did ask her.

THE RECTOR [*detected*] I only thought—it might be pleasant for you—young people—— [*She looks at him: his anxiety touches her.*]

LILY [*not too ungraciously*] All right, she can come. She won't come again. I know that sort.

THE RECTOR [*presuming on his victory*] My dear, do you think you could clear this? [*He gesticulates towards the table*] I have so much work to do before I go out.

LILY. Why on earth don't you give them one of the old sermons?

THE RECTOR [*in his public manner*] It's this question of the memorial. As I told Shepperley, I feel very strongly in the matter. I don't wish to be narrow, but it's the thin end of the—er—the Roman wedge.

LILY. What is ?

THE RECTOR. The proposed group behind the Communion Table. A low relief is one thing—but this is statuary—in the round.

LILY. What's the harm of a statue or two ? It's pretty.

THE RECTOR [*addressing the congregation*] Little children, keep yourselves from idols ! I'm taking that as my text. And—er—[*in his own manner*] I should be glad of the table to work on.

LILY. Well, I've got to dress first, anyway. You can't expect me to slop about in the cold.

THE RECTOR [*at once*] Never mind ! I'll do it.

LILY. You do fuss so over your sermons. Why can't you leave it till I come down ? [*She trails out.*]

THE RECTOR is very busy for the next few minutes reducing the room to order. He is quick and deft. When he is satisfied he turns to his desk, abstracts some papers from beneath his wife's litter of material which he is careful not to disturb, and settles himself to work at the table in the middle of the room. But he has no sooner got himself comfortably absorbed than a voice hails him from the window with—

Please sir ! Mr. Cobb !

He gets up and pulls open the window. A small sturdy village child appears in the opening.

THE RECTOR. Well, Flo, what's the front door for, eh ?

FLO [*She has the breathless manner of the shy child ; but an occasional gleam implies that she and* THE RECTOR *understand each other*] I—I thought the lady'ud open it. [*If he flinches at this, the child does not perceive it.*]

THE RECTOR. Well, what is it ?

FLO [*reciting*] Please, sir, Mother says Doctor says no cause f'r alarm an' no 'mediate hurry——

THE RECTOR. Well ?

FLO. No 'mediate hurry no cause f'r alarm but will you step down sometime please, to-day? And please, sir, teacher says she'ld be much obliged if you'ld step in on the way but she don't like to trouble you, please, sir!

THE RECTOR. What have you been doing to teacher, eh?

FLO [*with a giggle*] Please, sir, pipe's burst in the big schoolroom. Our standard's got the morning off.

THE RECTOR. I'll come in.

FLO. Please, sir, there's no 'mediate hurry an' no cause f'r alarm.

THE RECTOR. Say I'll be down before the end of the morning.

FLO. Please, sir—thank you! [*She turns to go.*]

THE RECTOR. I—er—Flo!

FLO (*her eyes dancing*). Yes, sir?

THE RECTOR. I—er—somewhere or other. [*He feels in his pockets.*]

FLO. In your big coat.

THE RECTOR. Of course.

He crosses to the pegs in the passage, feels in his coat, abstracts a narrow red packet of chocolate and, returning, shakes out a cube into the child's hand.

FLO. Thank you. [*She flashes a broad smile at him and trots out.*]

LILY'S VOICE [*calling*] Who was that.

THE RECTOR. Flo Sanders.

The front door bell rings.

LILY'S VOICE. Who's *that* now? Why can't they leave us alone?

THE RECTOR. I expect the child's forgotten something. I'll see to it.

He goes out into the passage and presently returns, ushering in, with nervous formality, SIR JAMES FOWLER.

THE RECTOR [*in his most public manner*] Most kind—most unexpected. Lily will be surprised. Most good of you to—er—to look us up.

SIR JAMES [*equally embarrassed*] Yes, well, ungodly hour, but I just

had to come. I can't stay long—got to catch the ten o'clock. Board meeting at twelve. Bell's coming up with me. He's coming in to fetch me—but I wanted a word with you first alone. [*Then, more naturally*] Well, how are you, old man, after—how many years ?

THE RECTOR [*formally*] I'm very well indeed, thank you, Sir James.

SIR JAMES ' Sir James ! '

THE RECTOR [*smiling a little*] Jimmy !

SIR JAMES. Yes, it was Jimmy last night. But why didn't you say anything ?

THE RECTOR. I didn't think you'ld remember me.

SIR JAMES. You remembered me.

THE RECTOR. Well, I've got you up there. [*He jerks his head towards one of the groups. There is a pause.*]

SIR JAMES. Well, Benjy, how goes everything ?

THE RECTOR. Very well, thank you, Sir James—Jimmy !

SIR JAMES. Altogether well ? You know—*I've* had such undreamed of luck——

THE RECTOR. Yes, I've followed your career.

SIR JAMES. We were all talking about you last night. Of course we'd lost touch—somehow I took it for granted—I've never realised that—that well—that luck hadn't discriminated——[*Beginning again*] I seem to be even more incredibly clumsy than usual——

THE RECTOR [*himself at last*] I—I don't take it like that. I'm glad to talk to—an old friend. But you're mistaken. Of course I haven't had what you're thinking of—material prosperity.

SIR JAMES. Yes, that's what I'm getting at.

THE RECTOR [*earnestly*] But I get a great deal out of life, I assure you. I like my work. People here are very kind. Very nice people. Besides [*his voice softens*] I have Lily.

SIR JAMES. Yes, they told me. I never guessed in the old days that you and Lily——

THE RECTOR [*beaming*] Ha ? Didn't you ? Yes, a lot of people were surprised. But Lily and I—she'll be pleased to see you. I never told her I'd seen you.

SIR JAMES. Didn't you ?

THE RECTOR. Didn't think it likely that you—er—— [*He implies*, 'would know me!']

SIR JAMES. I ought to have known. You haven't altered a scrap.

THE RECTOR. This is a quiet parish.

SIR JAMES. Are you never going to—I don't know much about Church matters—but are you never going to get a move on ? Because —look here ! I came round on an impulse.

THE RECTOR. You were always impulsive. Remember old Burton and the Martyrs Memorial ? [*They both chuckle.*]

SIR JAMES. That lunatic ! And he'a a K.C. now.

THE RECTOR. Is he indeed ? Ah, I've lost touch.

SIR JAMES. Well, look here ! You know—or rather I don't expect you do know—I hardly know it myself—but I've got myself tangled up with the best part of a county lately. The old man's dead.

THE RECTOR. Yes, I saw it in the paper.

SIR JAMES. He sank all his money in land, God help me ! Well, look here, old man, there's a living attached—fallen vacant. And they tell me it's in my gift. Nothing settled yet. Well, what about it ?

THE RECTOR. What about it, Jimmy ?

SIR JAMES. Well, what about it ? Old friends and all that ! You're wasted on a backwater.

THE RECTOR. Are you offering the living to me ?

SIR JAMES. No great shakes—but quite worth while. And there's a house and garden—and my gardens—welcome to anything, of course. Glad to get rid of it. Great score for me to have a pal——

THE RECTOR. You're offering it to me ?

SIR JAMES. Well, why not, eh ? Up to me to get a good man. Heard 'em talking last night—work you've done here.

THE RECTOR. It's the same Jimmy. Impulse—impulse ! You take things too lightly. This is a cure of souls.

SIR JAMES. 'Tisn't impulse. Judge of character. Come, Benjy, we knew each other well enough once. I'd be glad to get you. You needn't think it's a soft job. It's a big parish. You'll need a couple of curates.

THE RECTOR. It's impossible.

SIR JAMES. Why ?

THE RECTOR. It's quite impossible. I—I'm too old. I couldn't undertake—— [*Moved*] I'm very grateful.

SIR JAMES. But Benjy—if you've run this parish—— ?

THE RECTOR. They know me here. They make allowances. I've no social gift. I've no—— It's the social side. I can't pretend it's not tempting. But—I couldn't undertake it : it wouldn't be fair to the parishioners. It—it's the social side.

SIR JAMES. Look here—between ourselves—I gathered that—er—Lily and Lady Sara——but who could hit it off with Lady Sara ?

THE RECTOR [*ruffling up*] Lily ! I'm not discussing Lily.

SIR JAMES [*very much in the wrong*] No—no, of course——

THE RECTOR [*calming down, elaborately*] There would be, of course, the question of her health—if it got so far. But I mean it, Jimmy ! It's not possible. I'm not fitted—— [*Then, wistfully*] I—appreciate—but I daren't think of it, Jimmy—I—daren't think of it !

SIR JAMES [*formally*] You won't give me the very great pleasure——

THE RECTOR [*agitated*] I—I beg you—to—leave it at that.

SIR JAMES. Then—then what about—— ? Hang it all, Benjy, you might let a chap share his luck.

THE RECTOR [*simply*] D'you want me to ask you a favour ? I will if you like. [*Eagerly*] There's a young man I'm interested in—did very well in the war—got hurt at the finish—knocked about convalescing

for nearly three years. By that time, of course, time had got ahead of him. Will you give him a job? I'd better tell you that he's lost two already.

SIR JAMES. Oh, that sort!

THE RECTOR. No, no; but he can't do office work. But he's got brains.

SIR JAMES. Any self-confidence?

THE RECTOR. That's the trouble.

SIR JAMES. Hm!

THE RECTOR. He and Joan Shepperley are—are not engaged.

SIR JAMES. Oh! This is interesting. What's his name?

THE RECTOR. Despard. Gerry Despard. What I feel is, the war's derailed him. He's not really injured, but he wants a jerk, a hoist, to get him on the track again.

SIR JAMES. Can't the girl act as lever?

THE RECTOR. I have an idea she's trying; but she's young. It's too much for her to manage by herself.

SIR JAMES [*smiling*] So you want me——

THE RECTOR [*eagerly*] It's a favour. But I'm not asking you as a charity. I believe the boy's got a future if he could get on to the track again. His war record was brilliant. He had a gift for handling men.

SIR JAMES. Well, I don't mind seeing him. What's his address? I'll drop him a line.

THE RECTOR. I'll write it down for you. [*Then, as he fumbles among his papers*] I'm deeply obliged.

SIR JAMES [*pleasantly*] My dear man! Did you say a nephew of yours?

THE RECTOR. Oh, no—no relation.

SIR JAMES [*puzzled*] Oh?

THE RECTOR. He's one of my parishioners. [*This is not as complete an explanation to* SIR JAMES *as it seems to him; but before an answer can*

come, he continues] By the way, you won't mention my name. The Shepperleys don't approve of him—not for Joan. But I'm quite certain that if the boy could only get his——

SIR JAMES. His jerk on to the rails.

THE RECTOR. That's it! They're a nice young couple. Oh, there is Joan! Excuse me! [*He goes to the window*] Come in this way, won't you?

JOAN *and* DR. BELL *come in.*

THE RECTOR [*beaming*] This is most kind of you, Joan—most kind, most thoughtful. My wife will be down in a moment. [*He turns to* DR. BELL] *Bell!*

DR. BELL. Benjy! [*They shake hands*] I had to come in for a minute.

THE RECTOR. And how are you? Prospering, eh? Harley Street?

DR. BELL. *And* married.

THE RECTOR. Well, well! Boys and girls?

DR. BELL. Two boys. The eldest's sixteen. He can wear my hats.

THE RECTOR. Sent him to the old place?

DR. BELL. Well, of course! Funny thing—he's got our study.

THE RECTOR. No!

DR. BELL. Makes you think, eh? Yes, we're getting on.

JOAN [*amused at them: to* SIR JAMES] Were you all at school together?

SIR JAMES. Those two were.

THE RECTOR [*to* DR. BELL] I haven't been down since I married.

DR. BELL. Yes, I hear you're married too.

THE RECTOR. You remember Lily?

DR. BELL. I should think I do remember Lily.

At this moment LILY *comes into the room. She wears an elaborate dress, much too young for her, in a trying but fashionable shade. She sees* JOAN *first.*

LILY. Oh! [*Sharply, as* THE RECTOR *goes to her*] Why didn't you tell me? Good morning, Miss Shepperley.

JOAN. We're disgracefully early——

LILY [*sugary*] Not at all, I'm sure. Pleased to see you.

DR. BELL [*to* SIR JAMES] This the mother-in-law?

THE RECTOR [*bringing her over*] Here's Lily, Bell. [*The four stand looking at each other while* JOAN *continues unheeded.*]

JOAN. They insisted on coming in. I'm driving them down to catch the ten o'clock.

LILY. But—but——

SIR JAMES [*holding out his hand*] Old friends, Mrs. Cobb.

LILY [*staring*] Jim! Jim Fowler! It's Jim Fowler!

DR. BELL. And don't you remember me?

LILY. A friend o' Jim Fowler's. [*Slowly*] Well I never!

THE RECTOR [*beaming on them*] It takes us back, Lily! How long is it since we were all together last, eh, Sir James? He's Sir James now, my dear?

SIR JAMES [*embarrassed*] I wasn't Sir James then.

THE RECTOR. No—and I wasn't ordained.

DR. BELL. I hadn't got my degree.

LILY. I wasn't married.

JOAN [*wondering at them*] I wasn't born.

LILY [*tranced*] Up the river it was—the last time. Sunday afternoon. The four of us.

SIR JAMES. We had two boats.

LILY. That's right.

SIR JAMES. You wore one of those flopping hats with blue flowers in it.

LILY. That's right.

THE RECTOR. We tied up under some willows.

LILY. And Benjy cut his hand on a tin of sardines.

THE RECTOR. I'd forgotten that.

DR. BELL. I'd forgotten it all.

THE RECTOR. I've got the scar still.

SIR JAMES. And coming back we lost a rowlock, Lily and I. Didn't get home till eleven.

LILY. And Mother bit my head off when I got in.

JOAN. Why? [LILY *gives her an odd look.*]

SIR JAMES [*reminiscent*] It was my last term.

DR. BELL. Yes, and mine. You were up longer, Benjy. [*He turns to* THE RECTOR *and they talk.*]

LILY. Yes, he stayed after you'd gone—after you'd all gone. God! how long it is ago! And I'd always thought of it like yesterday till now. Are you married, too?

SIR JAMES. Bell is.

LILY. You're not?

SIR JAMES. No.

LILY. Ah, I always said you'd be the one to get on. Sir James! Lord! And I suppose you're rolling. Ah, well, some people are born lucky. It's luck that does it. Benjy works hard enough.

DR. BELL [*looking round*] That's what I'm telling him. He's worked too hard lately, by the looks of him.

LILY. Benjy? He's all right. Nothing ever hurts Benjy.

DR. BELL [to THE RECTOR] Well, that's my advice.

LILY. What advice?

DR. BELL. A hot whiskey and a couple of days in bed.

THE RECTOR [*annoyed*] My dear Bell—absurd!

DR. BELL. Professional—and entirely unsolicited.

SIR JAMES. You'll get the Medical Council down on you.

DR. BELL. Honestly, Mrs. Cobb, I'd make him see his own doctor.

LILY. Why, what do you mean?

JOAN [*who has been trying in vain to break in*] I say, I'm awfully sorry, but if you people want to catch that train——

SIR JAMES. What? [*He pulls out his watch*] So we must. It's later than I thought.

DR. BELL [*fussed*] Can we do it?

JOAN [*calmly*] Of course. I'm driving.

DR. BELL [*at his farewells*] Well, this has been a flying visit, but very pleasant—old times, eh? Well, good-bye, Cobb! Good-bye, Lily—must call you Lily. And [*with a nod at* THE RECTOR] I meant it. [*He goes out.*]

SIR JAMES [*following—to* LILY] Good-bye! But I shall see you again, you know. I shall make a point of it.

LILY [*vaguely*] You won't.

SIR JAMES. Of course I shall. By the way, Cobb, that address!

THE RECTOR. Oh yes! Here—it's most good of you.

SIR JAMES. I wish you'ld reconsider the other matter.

THE RECTOR [*hurriedly*] No, no. That's impossible.

SIR JAMES [*shaking hands*] Well, think it over, see!

LILY. Think what over?

JOAN [*at the window*] Look here, you must come, Sir James!

SIR JAMES. Coming. Good-bye, Lily! Good-bye, Benjy! [*Then, turning in the window*] Look here, I'll hold it open for a week, see! Give you time to think it over.

THE RECTOR [*half vexed*] He hasn't changed much. [*Then, smiling*] Nice fellow! [*He turns to the table and sits down, pulling his papers to him.*]

LILY. Think over what?

THE RECTOR. It was—er—only one of Jimmy's wild ideas. No, he hasn't changed. [*He begins to write.*]

LILY. What did he want you to do?

THE RECTOR. Nothing I could do. Excuse me, my dear, but I

have to get on with my work. Very pleasant to see them, eh, Lily? But they've taken up too much of my morning.

He writes. LILY *fidgets about the room, takes up a piece of sewing, puts it down again and comes back to the table.*

LILY. What was it, Benjy?

THE RECTOR [*not listening*] Eh? You might pass me that book, my dear.

She passes it to him, and waits. THE RECTOR *absorbs himself anew. She watches him with a twisted smile. Presently her foot begins to tap.*

LILY [*impatiently*] Well? Well?

THE RECTOR [*looking up abstractedly*] No, I'd better stick to St. John.

LILY. What?

THE RECTOR. There's a text in Chronicles that attracted me for a moment—'And he took away the strange gods and the idol out of the house of the Lord.' Apposite, eh? In this matter of the Memorial? But a little over their heads possibly. [LILY *gives an impatient shrug*] Ah, you think so too. Yes, I'd better stick to St. John. 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' That's plain enough. Nobody could fail to take that to themselves.

LILY. Benjy! I'm asking you what Jim Fowler wanted you to think over. You put me off and you put me off——

THE RECTOR. Oh—that! My dear, the matter's settled.

LILY. Well, I want to know.

THE RECTOR [*smiling*] I—I don't want to tell you.

LILY. D'you think I didn't know that? That's why I want to know.

THE RECTOR. It was—a passing idea. You know Jimmy of old. Exaggeration—he has an exaggerated idea of my capacities, and so——

LILY [*tense*] He hasn't offered you—something better?

THE RECTOR. Nothing I could accept. It was a large parish—two curates—we couldn't have managed it.

LILY. And why not ?

THE RECTOR. Quite impossible.

LILY. Why on earth not ? A big parish—change—more money ? Of course it was more money. And you refused ? My God, there's a chance of a bit of fun and life, and a bit of money to spend—and you refused ? What possessed you ? Well, it's not too late. He said think it over. I'll write to him at once.

THE RECTOR. Lily, I can't let you interfere in this.

LILY. Can't let me ! Isn't it my affair as much as yours ? Aren't I your wife ? How dare you, without consulting me, refuse ? Why should you refuse ?

THE RECTOR [*painfully*] I don't feel that I—have been sufficiently successful here to—to have earned preferment. Not on the whole, Lily. And this is a small parish.

LILY. You work like a nigger : they all say that.

THE RECTOR. I'm not fitted : I'm not suited : I feel my deficiencies——

LILY. What deficiencies ? You're as good as they are.

THE RECTOR [*not looking at her*] It—it's the social side.

LILY [*working herself up*] D'you mean me ?

THE RECTOR. No, no, Lily—no. I——

LILY [*raging*] You do mean it's me ? Well, I like that ! After all your promises ! My God, I'm learning a thing or two to-day. So you're putting it on to me ? You never think of my side of it. Did I think I was going to be stuck in this hole all my life when I married you—when I was fool enough to marry you ? Didn't you swear you'ld give me a good time ? And now, at last, when preferment comes along, you refuse it. God, I wish I'd my life again. Look at Jimmy Fowler ! I was good enough for Jimmy Fowler once. Look where he's ended ! Rolling, you can see it, and a title, and to think if I'd only had the sense—if I'd only had the sense—I'ld have been going shares. And all of you talking about the picnic ! Not home till eleven !

'Why?' she says—'Why?' Oh, isn't she a 'naice chaild!' What a lot they think they know!

THE RECTOR [*hoarsely*] Stop, Lily! Stop! You don't know what you're saying.

LILY [*beside herself*] 'Why?' she says! Don't you know why? Didn't you know? Of course you knew. You must have known. You couldn't have been such a——[*She stops, staring at him: her tone changes: perhaps the look on his face changes it*] Benjy, you did know? Don't sit and look like that, damn you! Of course you knew. You didn't think I'ld have married you—you—after playing around with swells like Jimmy and them all, not unless I'd mucked things. I told you Mother was fed up with me. I'ld have been off to London if you hadn't stopped me. [*Still more on the defensive.*] You know that anyway—I told you that. After all, you offered. What was I to do? What else could I do, I ask you? And you were always nice to me. And everybody said you'ld be a big pot before you died. The Bishop and Mrs. Cobb! I thought it wouldn't be so bad. Benjy! Benjy—don't look like that!

THE RECTOR. Little children—little children——

LILY [*a last flicker*] What are you muttering about?

THE RECTOR. Keep yourselves from idols.

LILY [*heavily*] Benjy, I never was up to your notions. I told you so all along. It's time you took it as read.

THE RECTOR. From idols—from idols. [*There is a silence.*]

LILY. Benjy!

THE RECTOR [*mechanically*] Yes—my dear——

LILY. Are you——? Are you——? I suppose now you're on your high horse? [*She gets no answer*] Well, I did always warn you I was not your style.

THE RECTOR *rises wearily and goes across the room to the passage and takes down his coat.*

LILY [*in sudden panic*] Benjy, what are you going to do? You're not going to leave me or anything? It's twenty-five years ago. It wouldn't be fair now to leave me in the lurch.

THE RECTOR. Don't distress yourself, Lily.

LILY. You're not going out?

THE RECTOR. I've to go out. I haven't done my rounds.

A VOICE [*at the window*] Please, sir——

LILY. Oh, there's that everlasting child again!

THE RECTOR [*He rises and goes to the window and lets the child in*] What is it, Flo? And didn't I tell you to ring at the front door?

FLO. Yes sir. Please, sir, Mother says will you come at once?

THE RECTOR. Why—yes, of course!

FLO. Yes, sir, because there's been a turn for the worse and Mother says will you come at once?

THE RECTOR. I see. Run on ahead and tell your mother I'll be with her in ten minutes.

FLO. Yes, sir. [*She goes*]

LILY [*sharply*] You're not going out this morning.

THE RECTOR. There are three people ill in that one house. Of course I must go down.

LILY. Bell said to me with his own mouth that you weren't fit to be up.

THE RECTOR [*flashing out*] Let Bell mind his own business!

LILY. It is his business. He's a doctor, isn't he? Besides, can't I see? Look at yourself in the glass.

THE RECTOR. I'm not going to stay at home this morning. I've got my work to do. Don't worry me, Lily!

LILY. Walking about with flu on you in this weather! You fool! [*Coaxing*] Benjy, I'll go down. I'll help in the nursing. Truly I will, if only you'll—— Feel how hot your hand is! If you got ill—— I'm frightened all of a sudden.

THE RECTOR. They're my sick and they've asked for me. I'm a clergyman.

LILY. It's always the same. When it's me or the parish you always put the parish first—always have and always will. [*Then, as he goes to the window, childishly*] Benjy, are you doing it to punish me ?

THE RECTOR [*moved, turning back to her*] O my poor girl—my poor girl !

LILY [*clinging to him*] Don't go, Benjy ! Benjy, don't go ! Not just now. I'll nurse you. I'll look after you. I'll make it up to you. He frightened me. He said you looked so ill. [*Then, as he disengages himself*] Benjy, you're not going ?

THE RECTOR [*soothing*] But look how I'm wrapped up.

LILY. But I *ask* you not to. I *ask* you ! [*He goes to the window and opens it*] Oh, all right ! Go then !

THE RECTOR [*quietly*] I'll be back as soon as I can.

LILY [*raging*] I don't care if you never come back.

He gives her a quick look, a half smile, and goes out.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT III

SCENE I

It is night and latish. It is little over a week ago that the Reverend Benjamin Cobb left his house, bent on that particular duty of his calling, visiting the sick. Judging by the hat-pegs he is not yet back, for while a woman's hat and jacket hang on one, the other is bare. If he came he would find the room oddly changed for the worse. The fire obviously has not been lighted for days, for grate and hearth are littered with strips of cloth, a paper pattern crunched into a ball, and threads and rags of sewing material. The only light is a flaring country lamp. The machine is once more on the table. LILY COBB *sits at it, her back to the window, driving it with uneven bursts of energy with her right hand, while her left guides a length of material. A half-made black dress is on the stand and more material is scattered about the room.* LILY COBB *wears a garment precisely similar to the dressing-gown she wore ten days ago, but black—a woman would say, dyed, and dyed at home. Beneath it she wears a black under-dress with black shoes and stockings. Later when she moves and talks the dressing-gown is at its old trick of slipping off her bare shoulders. Possibly it is the effect of the dim light, but seen against the black of her garments, her face bears the look of a creature bleached with fatigue. Presently comes a tap at the door: she neither lifts her head nor answers. The tap is repeated. Then the tapper, who is* MRS. BEWLEY, *copes rather cleverly with the closed door behind which she stands by balancing the heavy tray she carries on her raised knee, while with her free hand she rapidly turns the handle. You see her triumphant recovery of balance as the door bursts open.*

MRS. BEWLEY. Now you'll take a snack of something, won't you, Mrs. Cobb? Here's a cup o' cocoa. [LILY *goes on machining.* MRS. BEWLEY *sets down the tray on the desk*] You know, my dear, if you go on at that rate you can't last. It's my belief you sit at that machine all night as well as all day.

LILY [*without raising her head or checking her work*] I must have mourning.

MRS. BEWLEY. Yes, but——

LILY. I must have my mourning.

MRS. BEWLEY [*pausing beside her curiously*] But whatever will you do with all them things?

LILY. I will have my mourning.

MRS. BEWLEY. Well, it isn't my business. You'll drink your cocoa hot, Mrs. Cobb? [*There is no answer*] You won't leave it now like them other lots? [*There is no answer*] Come now, you must eat, you know! [*There is no answer: the machine is driven steadily forward.* MRS. BEWLEY *is baffled*] Well, if there's nothing further I can do to-night—[*She goes into the passage, takes down her bonnet and cloak from the peg and assumes them. As she does so the front door bell rings.*]

LILY [*starting up*] I won't see anyone. They're to leave me alone.

MRS. BEWLEY. It's prob'ly my Jim. It's 'is late night.

LILY. Well, he's not to come here. Nobody's to come here. I don't know what you're doing here.

MRS. BEWLEY. Come now, I've been 'ere every day this week.

LILY. I don't want you. [*The bell peals again: she starts up in a frenzy*] Send them away, I tell you! I'm going upstairs. I'm going to bed. I won't see them. I won't see anyone—ever. [*She hurries out of the room.*]

MRS. BEWLEY (*contemplative*] Pore dear! [*The bell rings again. She goes out and returns ushering in* MISS SHEPPERLEY *and* JOAN. *They are in dinner dresses.* MISS SHEPPERLEY *has a scarf over her head and*

they both wear wraps] It's no manner of use, Miss. She won't see no one. She's 'alf mad if you ask me. I tell you I 'ave had a time.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. It doesn't seem fair that all this should have fallen on you, after all your sad trouble with the Rector. One is so anxious to do what one can. But you know we've called and called—

MRS. BEWLEY. Ah well, with 'im dying in my 'ouse I naturally took an int'rest. And bringing 'er back afterwards, it give me the entry, as you might say.

JOAN. I do think it's decent of you, Mrs. Bewley.

MRS. BEWLEY. Why, Miss, that's nothing! It's the Reverend I'm thinking of. Oh, 'e was a nice man. And to think of 'im ony a week ago, so merry and bright at the choir practice, ticking off Susannah Pym, it makes you all upset if you know what I mean. Oh, 'e was a nice man! Though I says at the time to Vi'let, going 'ome, 'e can't keep it up, I says, nor Dr. Franks neither! I never see anything like them two—in an' out of the influenza patients—Did you 'ear Mrs. Sanders' mother had passed away, Miss, yes, and little Flo Sanders last night, pore kiddie, and everywhere the same, I see by the paper, people dying like flies. This influenza—chronic, I call it. Comes on you so sudden. And then 'is choir practices and what-nots in the evenings, just the same as usual. It's too much, I says, for one man to undertake. He'll c'llapse, I says to Vi'let, and the next day in my sitting-room, c'llapse 'e did.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Yes, yes, I know.

MRS. BEWLEY. Though a better patient—I didn't 'ave no trouble with 'im. Meek as a lamb. And as I said to Mrs. Cobb, I 'ope there's beds enough and sheets enough and to spare in the Green Man, and if Dr. Franks says not to move 'im, moved 'e shall not be. Not that it needed—'e was dead in twelve hours. Oh, this influenza! Epidemic, I call it! You don't know where you are.

JOAN. Yes, I know. But don't you think Mrs. Cobb—if she knows we're here——

MRS. BEWLEY. You never know 'ow she'll take things. Even over 'im, you know. She didn't seem to grasp 'ow ill 'e was. Get 'im 'ome, get 'im to herself, that's all she cared for. Dr. Franks was quite sharp with 'er at last, even for 'im. And you know what 'e can be. But he couldn't forbid 'er the room, not with 'im calling for 'er. 'Lily,' 'e says—— Oh, 'e was a nice man! So after I took 'er 'ome, I looked in like.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I suppose it's natural to shut herself away. We're none of us friends exactly. But I hoped at the funeral——

MRS. BEWLEY. I can tell you why she didn't come, Miss Shepperley. She 'adn't got 'er mourning, not to suit 'erself. She was all for ordering crapes and alpacas, till Mr. Brown 'e come up to see 'er 'imself and told 'er 'e'ld 'elp 'er like the rest of the vestry, for the Rector's sake, but 'e would not give 'er credit for fallals. The Rector 'ad warned 'im off, you know. Didn't you know that, Miss Shepperley? Oh yes! Oh, she ran up 'er bills, I can tell you, till the Rector found it out. Took 'im three years to pay it off, I 'ear. So Brown, 'e was firm. And would you believe it, Miss, she fair screamed 'im out of the 'ouse. Brown 'e was quite shaken, says 'e wouldn't go near 'er again for a five pound note. Oh, she isn't right. Since then she's been dyeing every rag in the 'ouse and making 'em over. And till it's done she won't see no one.

JOAN. Well, she's got to. She can't hold up the whole parish.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I thought with the strain of the funeral over she'ld be more ready——

MRS. BEWLEY. Well, I'll go up and tell 'er, Miss, with pleasure. But she won't see you. I tell you, she's not right. [*She goes out.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*troubled*] I don't know that it was wise to come.

JOAN. Well, I couldn't think of her sitting all the evening, staring

across at the churchyard. Even if she hates us it's better than being alone, poor thing! I can't help being sorry for her.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Are you? I'm not. Not in the least. It's pure sense of duty with me.

JOAN [*really shocked*] Aunt Ann, how utterly unlike you! [*A pause.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*abruptly*] Joan—you said the other night—I should have taken a lover. You were quite right, of course.

JOAN [*out of her depth*] I was only trying to shock you.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*ignoring the interruption, painfully*] He—he was why I never—anything.

JOAN. Aunt Ann!

MISS SHEPPERLEY. He was the sort of man—I could have cared for him. What's the use of pretending. I did care. I—cared. Oh, most respectably! Even that would have shocked him. He was so respectable. And so am I.

JOAN. But Aunt Ann——

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I'm Aunt Ann to you. I'm not Aunt Ann to myself. I'm Ann.

She turns composedly to the door as MRS. BEWLEY *returns. It is* JOAN *who is shaken, by this addition to her knowledge of human nature.*

MRS. BEWLEY [*apologetically triumphant*] It's no good, Miss. She won't see you.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Oh, but——

MRS. BEWLEY. I'm to see you out and lock the door after you. She won't come down till you're gone.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Oh, well then——[*She rises*].

JOAN [*unwillingly*] No, I suppose there's nothing to be done.

MRS. BEWLEY. And yet, Miss, I do wish you could have managed it. She don't eat and she don't speak. It's the Rector I'm thinking of, what he'd have wished done.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I know.

JOAN [*suddenly*] Mrs. Bewley, go out and shut the front door—hard—slam it!

MRS. BEWLEY [*appreciating the strategy*] Oh—oh, I see! Right, Miss Joan!

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*uneasily*] We can't, Joan. It's not our own house.

JOAN. It's not hers either. That's part of the problem. It's got to be dealt with sooner or later.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You're always so sure you know how to deal with problems and people.

JOAN. My dear Aunt, I'm busy enough with my own affairs: I'm not yearning to interfere. But something must be done—in common humanity.

MRS. BEWLEY. And really, Miss Shepperley, I don't like the responsibility of 'er, I reelly don't.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*overborne*] Oh, very well.

JOAN. And then you'd better get home, Mrs. Bewley.

MRS. BEWLEY. That's right. [*She goes out. The door is heard to slam. Then comes her voice in the passage*]. It's all right, Mrs. Cobb! I think I'll be off now, Mrs. Cobb! Good-night, Mrs. Cobb! [*Then, conspiratorially putting her head in at the door*] She's on the stairs. I'm off! Good-night, Miss Shepperley! Good-night, Miss Joan! [*She disappears.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*nervously*] Joan, I don't like this.

JOAN. Come over here!

They withdraw beyond the fireplace. MISS SHEPPERLEY *shakily sits down upon the sofa, to rise again as* LILY COBB *drags into the room, sees them, and stops.*

LILY. So you haven't gone. What a liar that woman is!

She takes no further notice of them, but, turning to the table,

picks up the black dress, slips off her dressing-gown, flings the material round her, draping herself with it, turning slowly to and fro in front of the pier-glass, settling it to her satisfaction. The two women watch her, bewildered. Presently she huddles the dressing-gown round her again, picks up the work, sits down to the machine and begins pinning a length, preparatory to stitching. As she does so, she speaks.

LILY. What do you want here—now ?

JOAN. Oh, Mrs. Cobb, we thought—[*She pauses : the situation is too much for her*].

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*coming forward so that the table is between the two women, while* JOAN *moves to the mantelpiece and stands leaning against it, watching*] Lady Sara—my sister-in-law and I, we have been hoping you would let us be of some use to you.

LILY [*biting at a thread*] Pity you didn't come sooner.

JOAN. Oh, but—we called every day. Mother was so worried that you weren't able to see her.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. So to-night—though one was diffident about intruding——

LILY. Yes, you've been diffident about intruding for twenty years—the lot of you. But you think you can come and go as you please, I suppose, now that my husband's been and left me in the lurch.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*outraged*] Mrs. Cobb !

LILY. Well, hasn't he left me in the lurch ? What call had he to go grubbing round in those muck heaps they call cottages——

MISS SHEPPERLEY. But Mrs. Cobb, surely you realise——

LILY [*flinging up her head*] I realise that after all—after all he thought more of his tin-pot parish than he did of his wife. Didn't he know he was ill ? Didn't Bell tell him so ? But d'you think he'ld listen to me when I begged him and prayed him to stay at home ? Not he ! A

stranger had only to send him a message—Him and his duty! It's as if he died to spite me.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*suddenly losing her self-control*] To please you, I should think!

LILY [*dropping her work and getting to her feet, her face flaming, her voice raucous*] What the hell do you mean?

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*with equal fierceness*] You know what hell I mean.

JOAN [*startled*] Auntie dear!

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*sternly*] Be quiet, Joan! You're a child: this is beyond you. [*To* LILY] You don't know what I mean—what hell I mean? Then I'll tell you. It's time somebody told you. I mean this—this house, this home, this hell you made for him to live in.

JOAN. Aunt Ann!

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Be quiet, Joan! He left you in the lurch? He? You? When you first came here, while you still went about showing off your stupid vanity and your vulgar temper, spending his money, hampering his work, making his position impossible, people used to look at him as such a stick, such a laughing-stock. Didn't you know? We all knew about the quarrels that went on here. People heard your voice in the road as they went past. They used to make bets, my brother told me, as to whether he were beating you or you were beating him, laughing at him. Didn't you know? He knew. People didn't mind letting him know, before they got to like him and be sorry for him. For that's what happened. He made himself respected in spite of you, just because he never asked for sympathy, never, by a word or by a look. And he made you respected. Left you in the lurch? Why, he carried you in his hands: he dared us to show what we thought of you. Even now, dead, he's daring us, daring the whole parish not to look after you. Yes, he made himself loved. And knowing what his life was, with you, a woman like you, hating him and using him like a dog as you have done, don't you think we're glad

it's over? At the funeral to-day you should have seen all the people; but you were too busy to come, weren't you?—too busy to come! Well, there was not one of them, of those people, that didn't thank God that he was free at last, dead and free of his bitter troubles. And you—you—you sit there making mourning for him! Why, it makes me laugh. He went out when he was ill and you begged him not to—and so if he died—O God, give me patience! As if you didn't know what we all know—that whatever his way of release may have been he's none the less a murdered man, and that his wife—his own wife—has killed him!

She stops. The two women stare at each other for a moment without a word: both are panting a little. Then LILY COBB *says, quite quietly—*

LILY. You must be mad.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*the reaction has already begun: her hand shakes: her voice shakes, but she braces herself*] Must I, Mrs. Cobb? Then we're all mad in this village; for I'm saying what we all think.

LILY COBB *stands looking at her for a moment, her mouth half open: then she looks down at her work as if she had never seen it before. Then she looks from one woman to another and says at last, stammering a little—*

LILY. But—but I loved him.

MISS SHEPPERLEY *begins to laugh hysterically.* JOAN *goes quickly to her.*

LILY [*bewildered*] Why do you laugh? I loved him. [*Then, with a sort of hastening of her speech, like a storm blowing up on a heavy day*] I loved him. It's not true what you say. I tell you I loved him. I loved him. [*Crying out suddenly*] Benjy, you know! Benjy, tell her! Benjy!

She waits as if for an answer, moving her hands as if she were feeling for support. But when no answer comes and no hands

are stretched out to help her, she suddenly falls back into her chair, and, bowing her head, begins to cry. The two women stand quiet. The contempt with which MISS SHEPPERLEY *has watched the outburst changes slowly to concern, and then to alarm.*

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*whispering*] Mrs. Cobb! Mrs. Cobb!

The weeping continues. It is more like a man crying than a woman. It is more like a lost soul on judgment day, crying after sentence, than either.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. It's hysteria. Joan, it is hysteria, isn't it?

JOAN [*comprehension dawning on her face*] Grief.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. God forgive me!

They watch her as she lifts her head. Her eyes wander round the room weakly and fix themselves at last on the black stuff in her hand. Then her lip begins to quiver anew: her eyes fill: the muscles of her throat strain: she staggers to her feet, fighting for her self-control, her face twisted up into a puckered mask and so walks up and down wringing her hands as if in physical torture.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*at last*] Speak to her, Joan!

JOAN. Mrs. Cobb—Aunt Ann didn't mean—she didn't understand. Listen! You must try and control yourself. We're so sorry for you; but you must stop crying so. You'll hurt yourself.

She puts her arm round her. LILY *breaks away from her with a scream.*

LILY. Benjy! Benjy, where are you? Benjy!

She flings off JOAN'S *detaining hand, darts to the window, wrestles it open and disappears into the darkness. You hear her voice calling—*

Benjy!

and dying away.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Where has she gone?

JOAN. She must be followed.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Joan!

JOAN. What?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. He was always so afraid of——

JOAN. What?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. The Ponds.

JOAN. They must get the car out——

MISS SHEPPERLEY. I'll go across to your father. But suppose she comes back? Someone ought to stay here.

JOAN. I'll stay.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*on the threshold*] Will you? I can't, Joan. All the ghosts of the past are gathered here for me. [*She goes out.*]

JOAN. The ghosts of the past? No, Aunt Ann! The ghosts of the future.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

SCENE II

It is some nine or ten hours later. The scene is once more LADY SARA'S *drawing-room, which has the peculiarly chilly and unwelcoming look which a drawing-room always wears in the early morning. The fire has only just been lighted and the maid is still busy with a duster when* JOAN SHEPPERLEY *drags wearily into the room. She is still in her evening clothes.*

JOAN [*fretfully*] Elizabeth, why isn't the dining-room done? It's nearly eight—and breakfast isn't laid.

THE MAID. Well, Miss, I and Alice didn't get a wink last night with half the house up and about. And then this morning we overslept. Alice is at it now, Miss.

JOAN. Oh, I see. [*She tosses her cloak on to a chair and drops on to the sofa*] Elizabeth, can you get me a cup of tea?

THE MAID. Why yes, Miss! There's some just made. [*She puts down her duster and goes out and after a moment returns with a breakfast cup on a tray.*]

JOAN [*taking it*] Thank you. Is my father back?

THE MAID. He and Miss Shepperley came back an hour ago, Miss, but they went off again. It's a mystery where Mrs. Cobb's got to, isn't it, Miss?

JOAN. Is my mother up?

THE MAID. She's dressing, Miss.

JOAN. Does she know what's been happening?

THE MAID. She was asleep when I took in the tea. I don't know if the master went up to her when he changed, Miss. He did get sopped down at the Ponds. You haven't heard any more, Miss?

JOAN. No.

She lies back and closes her eyes. THE MAID *hesitates a moment and then goes out closing the door quietly, but almost immediately returns.*

THE MAID. Miss Joan, Mr. Despard's in the hall. He's enquiring whether you're back yet.

JOAN. Show him in here! And, Elizabeth—bring another cup!

THE MAID. Yes, Miss.

She goes out, and a moment later GERRY DESPARD *hurries in. He also looks tired, but he walks and speaks much more alertly than a week ago. At the moment he is in a high state of rather breathless indignation.*

GERRY. Oh, you are home. Miss Shepperley only just mentioned that she'd left you all alone at the Rectory yesterday evening. Unheard of!

JOAN. I'm not a child, Gerry.

GERRY. I know what you are, thank you! I told her you were quite capable of staying there all night.

JOAN. So I did stay.

GERRY. You didn't!

JOAN. Of course I did. Mrs. Cobb might have come back. I was all right. I sat and sort of—thought about things.

GERRY [*angrily*] I can't make out your aunt. She's behaving as if Mrs. Cobb were the only thing that mattered.

JOAN. Aunt Ann thinks it's her fault. They had a dreadful row. But Mrs. Cobb—she broke us both up. She cried so. She cried—Gerry, I'm not feeling so clever as I did. I've never seen—passions. [*Then, with a touch of wildness*] Gerry, what are you doing here? Are you in this too? How did you come into it?

GERRY. Steady, old thing!

JOAN. I'm all on edge. I—I've been talking to ghosts all night. [*Tearfully*] Where's that dam' tea?

GERRY [*ministering*] I'll jolly well tell Miss Shepperley what I think.

JOAN. Don't be silly! I'm a little tired, that's all. Here, you have some, too. You don't look—shaved—either. Were you up all night, too?

GERRY [*briskly*] Every one was. It's all over the place. Your father knocked up Wills: that woke me, of course. I dashed off to knock up Franks. Your aunt thought he might be needed. By the time he was dressed half the village was out with lights and rumours. Joan, it's queer how people sort of—enjoy——

JOAN. Yes, I know. I've noticed. What rumours?

GERRY. The Ponds. It set us all off—a mad rush down the hill. You know how steep Wedmore Hill is, but we seemed to be down in two minutes. Of course, when we got there we hadn't got a drag; so I knocked up Oulson and your father and I ran him down to his barns in the car. We fished out some ropes and netting. That seemed to take all night—what with the darkness and the wet. God, it was cold! [*He is warming his hands at the fire as he speaks.*]

JOAN. Gerry, how oddly you're talking! *You* didn't—enjoy?

GERRY [*pulled up short*] What? What's that? Oh! Oh, I see! [*Turning round to her*] Joan, I wonder if you'll understand—it took me back.

JOAN. Back where?

GERRY. To the war.

JOAN. The war?

GERRY. I used to—run things, you know. I used to run people. I used to be in charge. Last night—well, I was in charge again. They did what I told them. I knew what I was doing: they didn't. [*Sitting down beside her*] It's made me feel different somehow. I feel—I feel——

JOAN [*half to herself*] How strange—how very, very strange!

GERRY [*hurt*] You don't understand. You think I'm being callous. Honestly, at the time, I was only thinking of that wretched woman. But now——

JOAN [*eagerly*] No, no. I don't think you callous. But how strangely things work out. That's all I'm thinking—that she—that he—that his death should make you live again.

GERRY. That's it! You've got it in one. That's what I feel. I'm living again. [*In sudden panic*] Oh, Joan, it will last?

JOAN. Of course it will, Gerry dear. I know it will.

GERRY. It will—it shall—— [*A postman's knock is heard*] What's that? [*He is on his feet in an instant.*]

JOAN. Don't jump so, Gerry. It's only the postman.

THE MAID [*entering with a salver*] The letters, Miss.

JOAN. Any for me?

THE MAID. Yes, Miss.

JOAN [*looking through them and retaining a letter*] No, the rest are Miss Shepperley's. Put them in the hall. [*Opening the letter*] I don't know the hand. Oh! Gerry, here's something for you! It's from

Sir James. I didn't know you knew Sir James. [*She tosses him an enclosure and looks at the end of her own letter.*]

GERRY. Nor do I. Who is he ?

JOAN. Father's pal. You know, he was here last week. He says—he's mislaid your address and would I very kindly forward the enclosure.

GERRY. What's he writing to me for ? [*He opens the letter and reads it with an air of stupefaction. Then he turns to* JOAN *suspiciously.*] Joan, is this a put-up job ?

JOAN. Put-up job ? What ?

GERRY. I mean are you behind this ? Have you been pulling wires —because if you have—— ?

JOAN. I don't know what you mean, Gerry.

GERRY. Because if you think I'll take bread and butter from you——

JOAN. Gerry darling, don't get so excited. What is it ?

GERRY. The man's offered me a job—an apprenticeship—in his works.

JOAN. He hasn't ! Oh, my dear !

GERRY [*still suspicious*] Joan, you've talked to him or something. I know you.

JOAN. I haven't. I swear to you—my sacred, absolute oath. I never even mentioned your name.

GERRY. Well, somebody has.

JOAN. What does he say ?

GERRY. Read it !

JOAN [*skimming over the paper*] Highly recommended by a mutual friend—— Now who ?

GERRY [*with a touch of his old manner*] We didn't know I was so flush of friends, did we ?

JOAN. Are you pleased ?

GERRY. Pleased ? It's my own sort of job—what I was going in for if the war hadn't come. Afterwards you couldn't get a foot in

anywhere. I'm no good at office work; but this—Joan, I would be suitable.

JOAN. A mutual friend. I should like to know who it is.

GERRY [*with a sort of whimsical bitterness*] He can't know me well. He recommends me.

JOAN [*a hand on his shoulder*]. You're not going to talk that way. I won't have it. I always told you you'd only got to rouse yourself.

GERRY [*wistfully*] My word—you can buck a person when you want to.

JOAN. Can I? Do I? Sometimes I think I only trample. And yet—Gerry, I'll tell you this—whether we marry or not—I do love you. [*Then, as he makes a movement*] No, listen! I wasn't sure before; but now I know. All last night I've been seeing myself: first the Cobbs and then myself and you—battledore and shuttlecock. Gerry, would you call them dead failures—those two?

GERRY. I rather liked him.

JOAN. Yes, but did he pull it off?

GERRY. What are you getting at?

JOAN. Was it a failure—their getting married—their lives together—or did he pull it off? I shall know when I see her.

GERRY. She may not be alive.

JOAN. If she's killed herself—that's his failure. And if it's been just one of her crazy rages—then he's failed, too.

GERRY. What do you expect her to turn into—in a night?

JOAN. He had twenty-five years with her. I want to know what he's pulled off [*Changing abruptly*] A hundred and fifty to start with—two hundred in six months if you make good. Is that it?

GERRY. Subject to seeing me, of course.

JOAN [*ignoring the interruption*] Your own hundred—that's three hundred, and my three hundred—that's six hundred a year.

GERRY [*sharply*] Joan! [*They look at each other, wide-eyed: then he says shakily*] It wouldn't be fair till we were level.

JOAN. It's never been the money, old boy.

GERRY. Of course I know it wouldn't be fair to you anyway.

JOAN [*passionately*] That's it! That's what I've thought all these months. That's the sort of selfish beast I've been.

GERRY. Shut up, Joan!

JOAN. It's you, not me. Is it fair to you? [*Then, lamenting*] I'm domineering: I can't help it. It's because I'm so damned sensible. I'm always right. I'm such a managing woman. Shan't I be bad for you? I do love you, Gerry, but—perhaps I'm bad for you?

GERRY. I should have thought I ought to know.

JOAN. You don't look ahead. But I see things before they come.

GERRY [*abruptly*] I can't sit and analyse. I only know nothing matters much unless you're in it. But if you don't feel that—too—about me—I can see, it wouldn't work.

A car is heard driving up.

GERRY. There's your father and your Aunt.

JOAN. Oh, I'd forgotten. Have they found her? What beasts we are talking about ourselves!

GERRY. I'd better clear.

JOAN. Why should you? You came to see me, didn't you? Gerry, why don't you stand up for yourself? [*Then, as* MISS SHEPPERLEY *and* MR. SHEPPERLEY *come in*] Well?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Found.

JOAN. Where?

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Near enough, if we'd thought of looking. [*He goes over to the fireplace.*]

MISS SHEPPERLEY. In the churchyard—on his grave Call ourselves women! We might have known.

GERRY. Dead? [MR. SHEPPERLEY *nods.*]

JOAN. She didn't—she didn't—— ?

MISS SHEPPERLEY. No, thank God !

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Exposure, Franks says. We got Franks to her. Exposure and exhaustion.

JOAN [*in strange triumph*] No—grief ! So he *did* pull it off.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. There was frost on her dress and hair.

GERRY [*to* MR. SHEPPERLEY] She must have lain there all night while we were searching.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. Bad business. [*The two men draw together as* MISS SHEPPERLEY *turns to* JOAN.]

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Oh, that cuts me to the heart, Joan, to think of how he must have grieved to hear her above him, in the darkness, calling to him, getting no answer, getting no help, when he'd cherished her so.

LADY SARA enters, a picture of rest and refreshment. She looks at the moment much younger than her dishevelled daughter.

LADY SARA. Well ! You poor dear people ! What a time you've had ! Joan, my darling child, you look like a sheet. But what was the good of your sitting there all night ? Ann should never have allowed it. Ann, really, you shouldn't have allowed it.

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*colourless*] She's found, Sara.

LADY SARA. Yes, I know. Elizabeth told me. Servants always know before you do yourself. I never heard such a dreadful business. Poor thing ! But wasn't it just like that woman ? Poor creature ! George, you look worn out. Of course I'd no idea : I slept right through it. Somebody ought to have woke me. Oh, is that you, Mr. Despard ? Oh, are you here ? [*A slight pause*] Well, there's nothing more to be done, is there ? Standing around won't help her. Poor creature ! I was shocked ! I can't say I'm surprised, you know. It's what I always expected—divorce or murder or something. She was such an impossible woman.

JOAN. Oh, Mother, can't you be just sorry for her.

LADY SARA. Well, my darling, you may think your mother a fool; but I've lived a good many years in the world and I've seen too much to be—just sentimental about it, like you young people. [*Shaken as she is, to be called sentimental by her mother is almost too much for* JOAN] And Ann, of course, Ann pities everybody. Well—there it is: she's dead, poor creature, and I know that and I'm sorry, and I wouldn't say it outside ourselves, but I can't get up much sympathy for her—for either of them for that matter. They had their lives to do what they liked with. What did he want to marry her for in the beginning, that's what I've always said. He must have known what would come of it. We know he knew what she was.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. She's dead, Sara.

JOAN. And if she were—what you all thought—does it say she didn't love him? And if he saved her from—things—didn't she know it? But I say—didn't she save him, too? I don't know how to put it.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. You're right, Joan. Better to break your heart than let it shrivel.

JOAN [*eagerly*] Yes, I mean that.

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Marriage——

LADY SARA. Is a lottery! Don't I know?

MISS SHEPPERLEY [*fiercely*] I *don't* know. Have I been on their voyage? Have I ever set sail for heaven to see the face of love? Who am I to judge?

LADY SARA [*in intense discomfort*] Ann dear—please——

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Grant that they wrecked themselves; but think of the stars they steered by.

JOAN [*eagerly*] Yes, that's what I think of. That's what I mean.

LADY SARA [*determined to end this high faluting*] Well, yes. Yes—well— Well, that's enough now, Joan! [*Excusing them*] I know

you're all very tired. A quiet breakfast and a bath and a rest—that's what you all want now.

MR. SHEPPERLEY. I told Franks to come in and we'ld give him breakfast. He's been up all night.

LADY SARA. Why, of course! I'm glad you thought of it. Oh, are you going, Mr. Despard? Oh, good-bye!

MR. SHEPPERLEY [*nudging her*] I say, Sara!

MISS SHEPPERLEY. Mr. Despard has been up all night too, Sara.

LADY SARA. Yes—well—he must hurry home and get a good breakfast and a good rest. Good-bye, Mr. Despard.

JOAN [*indignant*] Mother!

GERRY [*colourlessly*] Good-bye, Lady Sara!

JOAN [*sharply*] Wait a minute, Gerry! [*She goes up to him*]

LADY SARA [*plaintive*] What *is* it, Joan?

GERRY [*looking at her keenly*] What is it, Joan?

JOAN. I'll marry you whenever you like.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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